

# REFUGEES



**CINEMA FOR REFUGEES  
SOCIAL INCLUSION**

# FROM ESCAPE TO BELONGING 26 REAL LIFE STORIES OF REFUGEES

<http://refugeesinproject.eu>

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# INTRODUCTION:

When the partnership of this project endeavoured to seek out former refugees and interview them in order to identify role models who can help others in their efforts to become part of a society, we had in mind that it would be fairly easy to find people and engage them in this task. Considering the different organizations involved (from AE provider to Refugees Council or an Academic Institute), the partners chose different approaches to find and attract suitable people:

By asking people from their courses or from their body of teachers;

By working with refugees' organizations;

By asking around in their networks;

But some of us found out that former refugees are still reluctant to tell their stories: they fear retributions to their families at home; they are not sure whether it could harm their situation in the new country, and most of all: they all still suffer from the trauma of escape. Some said during the interviews "This is the first time I am telling my complete story to someone". But in Ireland and Germany, the former refugees showed no reluctance at all.

But, on the other hand, all interviewees shared their experience and their views openly and helped the partnership in collecting 26 amazing stories of Social Inclusion.

This seems to be a contradiction: fearing to tell your story and at the same time eager to do it? We think that this is understandable: while many of the refugees still have connections to relatives in their home country and are afraid of retributions, they still have a story to tell and it helps them to come to terms with their experiences.

Why did we choose these interviewees? What makes them role models? After extensive research in learning theories, we found that there are certain qualities constituting the ability to be a role model:

- Passion and Ability to Inspire
- Clear Set of Values
- Commitment to Community
- Selflessness and Acceptance of Others
- Ability to Overcome Obstacles

A person might not show all of these attributes, but instead shows one very strongly. All our interviewees are Role Models and have the characterization to function as good examples to emulate one's own behavior or to learn from them, this is our belief.

When refugees come to a new country (hopefully one of their choice) the first steps they take are usually towards securing shelter, food and safety. But if and when they decide that they would like to stay in this country, they might set out to be a part of the society and contribute to it in return for equal rights. This wish is often a driver for their actions. But how can one become an equal part of the society? And moreover, can a role model help in this process by setting an example, showing the way and how to do it? We believe Role Models can be hugely influential in this context.

Read these stories and find out for yourself!

# THE STORIES:

The 26 stories collected in this brochure are stories of people who fled from their country of origin, seeking safety somewhere else. Legally, the terms “asylum-seeker” and “refugee” are not the same:

The terms asylum seeker and refugee are often confused: an asylum-seeker is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated.

An asylum seeker is a person who flees from one country and applies for asylum, i.e. the right to international protection, in another country. An asylum seeker may be a refugee, a displaced person or a migrant, such as an economic migrant.

A person becomes an asylum seeker by making a formal application for the right to remain in another country and keeps that status until the application has been concluded. The relevant immigration authorities of the country of asylum determine whether the asylum seeker will be granted asylum and becomes an officially recognised refugee or whether asylum is refused and the person has to leave the country again and may even be deported. The asylum seeker may be recognised as a refugee and given refugee status if the person’s circumstances fall into the definition of “refugee” according to the 1951 Refugee Convention or other refugee laws, such as the European Convention on Human Rights – if asylum is claimed within the European Union. However, signatories to the refugee convention create their own policies for assessing the protection status of asylum seekers, and the proportion of asylum applicants who are rejected varies from country to country and year to year.

In this brochure, all the stories collected are from people who had to leave their country involuntary because of war, other atrocities or for fear of their life because of a personal situation.

# THE STORIES: YETUNDE



First name: **YETUNDE**

Last name: **AWOSANYA**

Age: **37**

Country of origin: **NIGERIA**

Living in **Ireland** since: **2014**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Yetunde was born in Lagos, Nigeria. She grew up with her parents and siblings, her father was an engineer who worked for a popular construction company called Julius Barger.

As a child Yetunde recognised and understood her parents were very hard working and independent, and this is where her strength comes from. As a child Yetunde was a performer, an outspoken person, she could dance, sing, act and venture into inspiring things that would make people around her, like her. She knew right back there and then what she wanted and went for it. She studied creative Arts in the University of Lagos Nigeria, obtaining a BSA in Art and a Theatre Major. Yetunde moved on to working with a fashion designer called Odio Mimonet in Victoria Island Lagos to gain experience, this was her first job. After this she left and began an apprenticeship with a good friend of her's who believed business is business. She was a makeup artist and she inspired and encouraged Yetunde to push harder and strive hard in the makeup industry to be better. Yetunde learned a lot from Ara-oge Makeovers.

**"THE ZEAL IN ME MADE ME REALISE I CAN ALWAYS BE BETTER."**

## SETTLING IN IRELAND – TEACHING & LEARNING

Yetunde came to Ireland and sought asylum (she had to leave Nigeria for safety reasons) in 2014. She was taken to County Cork (Millstreet), she was not happy at first, but the zeal in her made her realise she can always be better anywhere she found herself.

Yetunde picked herself up and approached a community worker who was working with KASI. She told him what she could do and that she was willing to volunteer herself to teach others 'Makeup and Beauty' in the hostel in County Cork where she was staying. The makeup class was funded by KASI with materials for the class to proceed. She started teaching the other women in the direct provision centre in Millstreet Co. Cork.

Yetunde gained great experience during her teaching practice. During her teaching time she was also also doing a QQI level 5 in pre-nursing for a year in McEgan College Macroom County Cork. After finishing her course she asked for a transfer to Mosney Direct Provision Centre, Mosney, County Meath.

## SETTLING IN MOSNEY – MY ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

When she got to Mosney she approached the management of Mosney Direct Provision Center and told them what she could do and how she could deliver her knowledge to others. They were very interested in her ideas about opening a Beauty Salon in the Mosney Center and the management there were very encouraging.

**It makes me happy that I put a smile on someone's face.**

# THE STORIES: YETUNDE

She raised a 'go fund me' initiative and through this, a lot of people from different walks of life inspired her by donating and encouraging her. She was very happy and excited when RTE (Irish National Broadcaster) journalist Phillip Bromwell saw her go fund me page and gave her a call for an interview about her idea. This gave her even more encouragement and welcome publicity!

The justice department of Ireland also approved of the idea of setting up the Beauty Salon with a professional standard and it was duly built in Mosney along with the creative ideas and input of Sarah Gates who is in charge of the management team in Mosney.

A lot of ladies came and were part of the Salon initiative. They obtained their certificates for participating on the Salon beauty training course. A lot of women gained knowledge in the application of basic makeup and one way or the other, it made Yetunde happy that she put a smile on someone's face. She is still learning and everyday is a new day with a newer experience.

In February 2018, Yetunde obtained her status and moved from Mosney to Dundalk, a county in Ireland north of Mosney, County Meath where she is starting a new business in the Beauty industry. She is happy to face new challenges and greater things to come ahead.

## THANK YOU

In the process of being in direct provision, Yetunde had the opportunity to meet a lot of people and a lot she never knew but they knew her by her name and still encouraged her.

She really appreciates everyone she came across in this journey, she says "I am truly blessed to have encountered you all. A big thank you goes to the management of Mosney Direct Provision Center, and all the ladies who also

**All the ladies  
who also were  
inspired by what they  
saw I could give.**

were inspired by what they saw Yetunde could give. Thank's to every donor of the go fund me, and a bigger thanks to my children who had patience for me to also deliver to others, but the biggest of thanks goes to God. I am truly appreciative and am bless to know you all".

# THE STORIES: SADAT



First name: **SADAT**

Last name: **SAYEDEHGAN**

Age: **19**

Country of origin: **AFGHANISTAN**

Living in **Germany** since: **2015**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Sadat Sayedehgan left Afghanistan, because he lived in the northern area where a lot of bombings took place. He did not feel safe, especially as a young man. It was his decision to leave the country, and his parents agreed with him. He came to Hamburg, and since he was still a minor, he came under special protection. He started school in Germany and after 18 months he took his exam for the middle school degree- and was successful. After that, he had the option to proceed with school and take the highest exam in order to go to university or to start a vocational training. He opted for school and this is what he is doing nowadays. For some time now he started to work as a freelance counsellor in refugees' camps, translating, giving advice and helping others who have newly arrived from Afghanistan to find their way.

## "NEVER STOP LEARNING"

### LEAVING THE COUNTRY ON HIS OWN

Sadat lived in a city in northern Afghanistan, and the area was often under bombardments.

His parents and younger siblings were not surprised when they learned about Sadat's plan to flee the country.

They agreed and Sadat planned how to get away on his own. He was only 17 years old. There were two options: the route via Turkey or via Russia. He had to use the help from professional traffickers. The flight went via Russia and Ukraine and he arrived in Austria after two months. From there he came to Hamburg. But he was still a minor, which meant that he was put under special protection, living in a supervised situation especially for underage refugees. He was taken under guardianship. Now it was up to him to shape his future.

### SCHOOL WAS EVERYTHING

Sadat was able to start school after being in Hamburg for 4 months. He was placed in a vocational school, into a special class for refugees/migrants. The school in Germany was very different from the one he went to in Afghanistan: new subjects, new words and different ways of teaching and learning. There was no additional help except for math, which he did not need. It was hard to concentrate in school because the situation in the housing facility was far from ideal: very often he could not sleep because there was noise during the night. It would have been easy to say to himself: I could not sleep all night, I will stay at home and not attend school. But that was not Sadat's way: he saw his only option in fighting the obstacles. In his opinion there are only

If you want to do something, there is always an opportunity!



# THE STORIES: SADAT

two ways to react if you face a problem: fight against it or lose. That meant: fighting the obstacles was the only way to success.

Sadat loved his school, his teachers and the environment. He really excelled in school: after less than two years he took the exam for the middle school degree and he pulled through, even got a 1,8 grade in German (1 being the best). He volunteered to make a speech during the graduation ceremony.

He still keeps in contact with his teachers and they are very proud of his success, deserved as it is because Sadat is working very hard.

## HELPING OTHERS WITH LANGUAGE AND ADVICE

After leaving the vocational school, Sadat had two options: starting a vocational training or go to school 2-3 more years in order to get the "Abitur" which enables him to go to university. This is his dream, to study economics at the university. That is why he decided to go to school to further his education for some more years.

It is not easy keeping up with all the demands in the new school, he did not know anyone, he is still not accustomed to German culture and there is not much help to get. But the German students and his new teachers are very encouraging and he never experienced any atrocity in his school. He was placed in a regular class, which meant that some subjects (such as Spanish language) were completely new to him. Also new is the fact that in Germany boys and girls are taught in the same class. But he is working hard and is planning his studies very thoroughly, regarding time and tasks and aims. He is always planning his next steps and without research

**If it gets tough, hold your head up high and pull through!**

and asking others for advice he is reluctant to give his opinion. "*Think twice, speak once*" is his motto.

Some time ago he had to give a presentation in school and he took a video of this and sent it to his parents. Of course, they are very proud of his achievements.

A while ago he went to a conference of the Police Academy. They were looking for volunteers acting as translators and counsellors in refugees' camps. At this conference, he introduced himself and showed his interest. He was subsequently approached by a police officer who said: "you have to come to the police force, we are looking exactly for people like you".

He did not say "no" and did not say "yes". Instead he weighed his options, even took the entrance test and passed. But for now he is happy with his decision to stay in school.

But as a volunteer to young people in the refugees' camps, he is a role model already. They ask him how to go about it and his only answer is: if you have an aim, you have to follow it and make a real effort. Otherwise, forget about your aim.

**Learning means everything to me.**

# THE STORIES: REZA



First name: **REZA**

Last name: **GHOLAMI**

Age: **29**

Country of origin: **AFGHANISTAN**

Living in **Greece** since: **2006**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Reza was born in Afghanistan but had to leave his country twice before coming to Greece as a refugee. During the civil war and the US invasion in Afghanistan (2001-2002) he moved to Pakistan where he stayed for three years before returning home. He left his country once more for Iran and finally came to Greece through Turkey in 2006, where he settled down and has integrated to a great extent.

## “SETTING UP THE AFGHAN COMMUNITY IN ATHENS”

### REZA'S STORY

Reza was born in Kabul, Afghanistan and worked there since he was 12, as a tailor's assistant. In the civil war, witnessing the Taliban destroying the schools in the country, he moved to Pakistan where he stayed for three years working and attending school. He briefly returned to Afghanistan before leaving for Iran when he was 17 years old. He arrived in Greece through Turkey in 2006. After arriving in Lesbos in a dinghy, along with four other people he met in

Turkey, he was held on the island for ten days and then released with a one-month permit. He arrived in Athens where, with the help of some fellow Afghans, he found a place to stay and got a job. He worked in many jobs, as construction worker, as electrician and plumber assistant etc. before finding steadier work as a carpenter, which he kept for three and a half years. His first appeal to be granted refugee status was rejected in 2006. In 2007 he started taking Greek courses at a center for refugees and in a special program hosted by the Greek university. While his Greek improved, he started realizing that he needed to reach out to people and explain the situation of refugees in a better and clear way. In 2010, he resumed high school while still working as a carpenter. That same year, he organizing a protest along with 100 other people at the Athens center, demanding that their asylum requests were re-examined; he passed an interview before a newly set-up committee and was finally recognized as a refugee in 2011. He subsequently changed jobs and became an interpreter until 2015.

In 2015 Reza started his own business, a restaurant, together with other people. Meanwhile, he had helped organize one of the major Afghan communities in Greece, active since 2011-12, which now numbers at least 360 members.

**Reza had to leave Afghanistan twice.**

He is currently trying to help others integrate through the Afghan community, giving advice to newcomers and trying to encourage them to improve their lives. Among other things, the community organizes events and holds meetings to help people get together but also to inform the public on refugee issues. He has personally collaborated with the UNHCR and UNICEF in an effort to educate people in schools regarding the situation and needs of refugees.

# THE STORIES: REZA

## CONFLICT

Reza had to leave Afghanistan twice: the first time because of the civil strife and the Taliban violence that ensued and the second because of his persecution by fanatical religious leaders who accused him of not fulfilling his religious duties as a Muslim.

## ESCAPE

Reza first left Afghanistan for Pakistan for three years. Upon his return, and when he realized that he could not stay in Afghanistan, he went to Iran and from there to Turkey where he crossed over to Greece in 2006 (island of Lesbos).

## BELONGING

A real important aspect in Reza's integration strategy was maintaining his job status, first through the help of other members of the Afghan community and then on his own, as his Greek language skills improved. He acknowledged that his basic tool for achieving smooth integration was learning Greek, which he focused on since the beginning and through this he managed not only to finish high school but also to pass the exams to get into Greek university (he succeeded in getting into university but since he had to go outside Athens, which he couldn't afford, he didn't attend). Finally, his excellent newly acquired Greek language skills were crucial in facilitating his integration and setting up his business.

**He  
worked with  
the UNHCR  
and UNICEF.**

# THE STORIES: GOODSON



First name: **GOODSON**

Last name: **EZENAGU**

Age: **28**

Country of origin: **NIGERIA**

Living in **Italy** since: **2013**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Goodson Ezanagu was born in Alor, Nigeria. He has a younger sister and attended elementary school. His parents died as a result of conflicts between villages bordering the city of Alor. Goodson was only 7 years old, he and his sister were raised by their grandmother and a maternal aunt. Goodson started working at the age of 12 at a clothing store in Lagos.

**“...MY GREAT RESOURCE WAS TO TRUST PEOPLE I MET ALONG MY PATH”**

## GOODSON' STORY

Goodson's parents, farmers, were killed in the village of Agoleri, by a group of guerrillas from the town of Umuleri. The conflicts were frequent between villages for both ethnic and economic issues. Goodson reports that one night they entered the house and in a violent way they attacked and killed his parents, stealing their crops and goods. From that tragic moment, he and his

5-year-old sister lived with her maternal grandmother, and since they had no economical resources they were unable to continue with their studies. After one year Goodson went to live with his maternal aunt in Onitsha where he attended elementary school. At the age of 12 he moved to Lagos and found work at a clothing store.

## CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

In 2011, Goodson moved to Maiduguri the capital of the Borno State where he worked as a chef's assistant in a restaurant. Life was very hard. He had to endure the suffering of his family and the strong terrorist presence of Boko-haram. In April 2013, a series of attacks in the city of Baga, inside the Borno State, led him to leave and head to Libya. Goodson worked in Libya as a painter, often subject to racist discrimination, but he does not lose sight of his goal. He wanted to earn money to get to Italy and apply for asylum. In August 2013 with the hope to live in Italy, he embarked on a boat.

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

Goodson landed on the coastline in August 2013. He was assigned to an emergency project run by an association in Perugia called *'Arcosolidarietà Ora d'Aria'*. He integrated easily both in the host structure and the community. The association submitted a request for asylum, but was rejected. Goodson appealed to the Civil Tribunal in Perugia and received subsidiary protection in 2015. Meanwhile, he joined a second 'SPRAR welcome project for refugees' where he continued to study the Italian language.

**My great resource was to trust people I met along my path.**

# THE STORIES: GOODSON

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

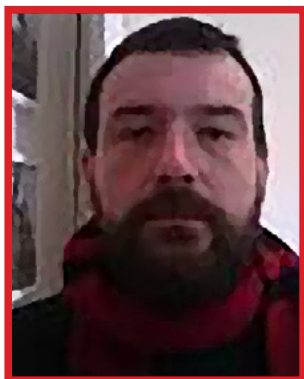
Goodson obtained the subsidiary protection thanks to the inclusion in the 'SPRAR' project, and managed to get a job at the 'Umbrò Restaurant' in Perugia, a well-known place of cultural and social events. He works there since 2015 and is very respected by all staff. The work at the restaurant puts him in touch with local people, creating a social network and important friendships that allow him to better face his painful past.

He lives alone in Perugia and continues to play football during his free time. He still thinks about Nigeria, but he looks forward to his life in Perugia, Italy.

My great resource was to trust people I met along my path. This allowed me to open and to know the "other person" without fear.

**This allowed me to open and to know the "other person" without fear.**

# THE STORIES: VUKASIN



First name: **VUKASIN**

Last name: **NEDELJKOVIC**

Age: **41**

Country of origin: **SERBIA**

Living in **Ireland** since: **2006**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Vukasin is married with children and arrived in Ireland in 2006 from Belgrade, Serbia seeking refugee status. When he arrived he was housed in a direct provision center. He found it very difficult at the beginning to cope with the environment. His strategy for coping grew from his creative background in the Arts he has a BA in photography from his studies in Belgrade. He started to take photographs and conducted video interviews of other Asylum seekers and his surroundings. This creative process helped him cope with “incarceration and confinement” which in this author’s opinion is a damning indictment of the Irish governments treatment of Asylum seekers. After a number of years Vukasin eventually got his papers and permission to stay in Ireland and he did an MA in IADT and continued to document these centres and continued to work on the visual representation of asylum and direct provision in Ireland. He is currently working on his Phd in DIT in Dublin the basis of which is his life in pictures documenting direct provision centers and their inhabitants throughout Ireland. For further reading and information please go to Asylum Archive.

## “... MY RADIO INTERVIEW BROADCAST LIVE ACROSS SERBIA”

### VUKASIN’S STORY CONFLICT AND ESCAPE FROM BELGRADE

Vukasin was a student in Belgrade at the height of the Balkans war in the period between 1991 and 1999. Serbia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which broke up in 1992. Serbia was dominated by Slobodan Milosevic as President of Serbia. Milosovic was ruthless in removing any opposition to his ruling serbian party and gained direct control of the military and security forces in 1997.

At this time Vukasin was active against Milosovic and was targeted by security forces in Belgrade, incarcerated and was tortured. The main event which brought about his arrest was the result of a radio interview he gave which was broadcast across Serbia condemning Milosovic and his politics in 1996. As a result of his treatment at the hands of the security forces Vukasin was traumatised and has suffered from ‘post traumatic stress disorder’ (PTSD) which is widely diagnosed in people who survive war over a sustained period of time such as the Yugoslavian war which lasted 10 years. After his release from captivity Vukasin on advise from family and friends fled Belgrade living in various locations and eventually arrived in Ireland in 2006 seeking Asylum and Irish citizenship.

**Everybody who is in the system should be allowed to stay.**

### STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

In addition to Vukasin’s coping strategy visually documenting his surroundings living in the direct provision center in Ireland between 2007 and 2009,



# THE STORIES: VUKASIN

Vukasin was always looking to education as a way of making a better life for himself and eventually his family. When he received his papers he began and completed an MA in Visual Arts Practice in the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, (IADT). Vukasin is currently working on his PhD in DIT in Aungier Street, Dublin. He has a young family and finds it very difficult to work, care and study all at the same time. He is also financially challenged as he is funding his own study after initial 'SUSI' funding for the first two years was stopped because he is earning too much which he disputes. He will now try and apply to the IRC for funding for the next two years. We touch on the topic of Ireland's contribution or response to the refugee crisis engulfing Europe and how little such a relatively wealthy country as Ireland is doing to help the situation. Vukasin has all the statistics ready and when I ask what more should we be doing to help the struggle refugees are experiencing he responds: *"I think that Ireland is really in a position where, those 4,500 thousand people who are in the system should be allowed to stay without any, any, eh, further delays or consequences. I wouldn't call it an amnesty... but I think everybody who is in the system already should be allowed to stay and then we can close direct provision centres and open a new chapter. Sit down together, at the table, and say what is the best way to proceed forward with the new people coming in?. But the problem is the people are not coming in... at all. Very few anyway".* He has a theory as to why this is the case... *"I think the message has been sent to homes to those countries where people are seeking asylum, where people are from, is very, very negative about Ireland. You know, so Ireland did succeed in that. So if I have a friend who asks me 'I would like to come to Ireland to seek asylum' say from a war torn country I would say maybe choose different country to seek refugee status than Ireland. So that message has been sent to Africa, to Middle East, to Syria, and to problem countries – so that is kind of problematic. Then we have the weather, you know people are not really used to this type of weather*

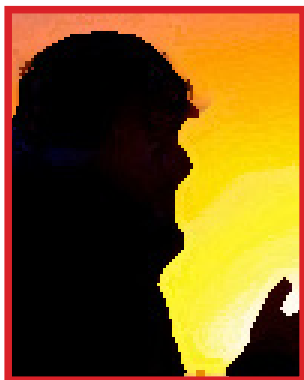
*either. And geographically it's very hard to reach Ireland because it's an Island, you know. So, em, eh,... It is sad to think that less and less people are coming in this country because I think Ireland can benefit more from the multiculturalism".* I mention that I am not proud to be Irish in respect of this topic and apologise for a flippant remark that we can't change in the Irish weather but should certainly change our attitude and conflicts surrounding refugees and grant all 'legitimate' direct provision people Irish citizenship as a matter of urgency.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Vukasin is married and settled in Ireland and has a very strong sense of belonging despite his recent study difficulties. To help him overcome this he thinks of all the help and support he has received to date and mentions IADT very favourably in this regard: *"I have had really amazing support, facebook for example, so social media has really played a major part in asylum archive his main project work. So the help I get from academics, visual artists, activists... Is tremendous. And so we can share that support... and support from my family, my wife and the children and from my supervisors. And so, yeah I get good support, not financial support, not as much as I would like so. It's moral support and encouragement to keep going."* On next steps? *"Well perhaps if I can complete my PhD, and I defend it successfully at the viva, I can write a book or perhaps a book can be published out of the thesis. So that's something I can give back to society. And I am also thinking of applying to get funding for a post doc – to maybe focus on similar issues but outside of Ireland. And then to do comparative analysis perhaps. Because I believe will we find very close similarities, you know, in the way people are who are so marginalised and vulnerable, are treated, across the board, really. This he feels would inform other governments and policy makers and benefit society."*

I get a lot of moral support to get going.

# THE STORIES: RANKO



First name: **RANKO**

Last name: **KRSTIČ**

Age: **30**

Country of origin: **BOSNIA**

Living in **Slovenia** since: **1993**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Ranko and his family lived near Bihač. When the war broke out his father worked in Slovenia and his sister was there with him. In 1993 Ranko and his mother joined the family, but came to Slovenia as refugees. They were granted a special “temporary refugee card” which gave them access to urgent medical care (but no dental care etc.) and some other rights. Ranko could not enrol in the secondary school of his choice, supposedly because he did not have Slovenian citizenship. When he finished secondary technical school studies, he started studying medicine. Today he is a medical doctor, preparing his State exam, he got married to a Slovenian girl, he feels accepted and respected for what he has done professionally. Emotionally he does not feel integrated. He is a refugee role model up to a certain extent because he is hyper socialised. He does what he is expected to do, being motivated from outside. But emotionally he does not belong... emotionally he is a displaced person. When considering the so called integration (if it is possible) the emotional side should be considered as well.

## I STARTED TO SETTLE DOWN WHEN I MET MY FUTURE WIFE

The family lived near Bihač and Ranko was lucky. Somehow. His father was employed in Slovenia. When the war broke out his father and his sister were in Slovenia, while Ranko and his mother came later in 1993 as refugees. Refugees from Croatia and Bosnia were not treated in the same way as traditional refugees, therefore their status was not quite clear. Refugees from Croatia were treated as displaced people, refugees from Bosnia were granted the status of “temporary refugee”. Upon their arrival the Slovenian Red Cross registered them. They got a registration card giving them access to different forms of aid. Bosnian refugees were not treated according to the Geneva Convention. Their rights were limited to urgent medical assistance, the right to education, food, accommodation and humanitarian aid. They were not granted the right to work. Later Ranko was told that 71% of the refugees who came to Slovenia were Muslims 20% of them were Croats. In 1997 they were supposed to go back to Bosnia, but their home in Bosnia was destroyed and it was not possible. So they stayed in Slovenia. But Ranko was a good student in elementary, secondary school as well at the University. He did everything that was expected from him, but somehow emotionally he could not adapt. Today Ranko is a medical doctor. Professionally he is totally integrated and appreciated but emotionally, well he does not know. He started to settle down, nevertheless, when he met his future wife who is Slovene he was well accepted by her friends and family. He thinks that this is not because of who he is, but of what he is professionally. He thinks all this is his fault, that he is somehow special and wants the impossible.



# THE STORIES: RANKO

## CONFLICT

Ranko does not want to recall it, nor describe it. He rather describes his feelings. He says that perhaps we will understand how a child feels when suddenly he is deprived of small and big things at the same time. A child who suddenly loses his friends, home, teachers, schoolmates and loving neighbours, the protection of his street, the playground where he was playing games with his best friend. A child that flees away because he is threatened. A child who has nightmares, only that his nightmares are special. One cannot wake up and forget about them. A child who cannot understand quite well what is going on around him. He can only hope that all might end up soon. A child who is afraid for his father's, his mother's, his sister's life more than his own. Such a child immediately learns to forget that it is cold outside, that he is hungry sleepy. Such a child tries to be courageous. Such a child grows up so quickly. But his or her experiences remain sealed in their souls forever.

## ESCAPE

Ranko and his mother waited to depart to Slovenia and join their father and sister there. Then some day they got on a bus and they were magically evacuated. It was in 1993. They took some luggage with them, not much. Some food as well some home made vegetable pie (Bosn. pita zeljanica) and they did not know they were going away for a long time. Then the bus was stopped at the border. Ranko's mother did not have a passport, neither did Ranko who was a small boy and for him this was his first travel "abroad". But they did have some kind of certificate proving that their father worked in Slovenia and that he would take care of them. When they arrived to Ljubljana his father and sister waited for them, so they did not need to end up in a refugee collecting centre. Their escape looked like a normal trip. Fortunately.

## BELONGING

Well, he still has not decided where he would like to live. He thinks it is normal that he has finished elementary school, secondary school, university studies and started working... and got married. He has not decided yet. He is preparing his state exam right now and later he will see. *"Always the same, then I will see"*. He would definitely like to go back to Bosnia on condition political and economic situation in Bosnia improved. He stays in touch with Bosnia. He tries very hard, but it is not easy. His friends, his neighbours have left. Well, now he has Slovenian citizenship. He was granted Slovenian citizenship because his father was a Slovene citizen. Now, with a new passport, travelling has become easy. Before, for instance, he went on a final baccalaureate trip with his class and he needed all sorts of visas. Well, he thinks he started belonging to this country when he met his future wife and her friends and family. He had some difficulties when he started searching for a job. He felt that Slovenian job applicants were more welcome. But this is not a rule! Where he works now, the boss would accept anybody on condition they work hard and have the knowledge and skills that are needed. Well, he felt discriminated when he wanted to enrol in grammar school and they told him that it was not possible because he did not have Slovenian citizenship. And his father enrolled him in a technical secondary school, which was nice and fine but this did not interest him. Then he enrolled at the Faculty of mechanical engineering only to discover that this was not his cup of tea. So he decided that he would switch to the Faculty of medicine. He managed and during his studies his average score was very high 9.1. out of 10. Now, in his circle, people are educated and there is no discrimination, he does not feel discriminated. But he is still convinced

**Finding the thing that attracts you is very important for your endurance.**

# THE STORIES: RANKO

that Slovenian society is a closed society. As far as institutions and services are concerned, he has not had particular problem. There was a doctor saying that she could not treat him, that he should go back to Bosnia where he belonged. *“Today Slovenian people have accepted me and they do not mind my slight accent. Probably because I am a doctor and I am good professionally. For this matter, I am accepted. Emotionally? I do not know. Emotionally I belong to Bosnia, Croatia, or I do not belong at all. I would say that Slovenian people want to have, to possess, to progress... How shall I say. They are more business oriented.”*

## MILESTONES AND STRATEGIES SUPPORTING RANKO'S INCLUSION

There are several milestones. His family lived in Slovenia and was supportive when he arrived with his mother. It was important for Ranko to be granted Slovenian citizenship. An important milestone is that he did not stay at the Faculty of mechanical engineering, that he decided to study medicine what he was attracted to. It was also important that he met his wife who is Slovenian. But Ranko points out that emotional inclusion into Slovenian society is difficult for somebody particularly if one is not from an urban environment and comes from Bosnia where relationships are cultivated on a daily basis.

**Emotionally?  
I belong to Bosnia,  
or to Croatia.  
Or nowhere.**

# THE STORIES: FELIX



First name: **FELIX**

Last name: **MAFUTA AGANZE**

Age: **30**

Country of origin: **DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**

Living in **Portugal** since: **2015**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Felix Mafuta Aganze, Congolese, transport manager, 30 years old, married with two children, defector of the rebel forces, escapes from DRC to survive. Arrives in Portugal in 2015, after a long journey that went through Rwanda, Russia and Finland. Fears for the lives of his two children who remain in DRC and does not know where his wife is, who has been kidnapped. Tries to forget his pain, with intense activity in Portugal, which integrates, besides providing customer service in French in a company, the study of the Portuguese language, the theatrical activity and responsibility for the library of the CPR. He prepares to take a new course in social sciences, learns to live alone and do housework and aspires to share his history and experiences, believing it can be helpful for others. Hopefully, these second steps will be good.

**“WHO LIVED HIS EARLY STEPS AND IT WAS BAD, LIKE ME, CAN LIVE THE SECOND STEPS AND BE GOOD”**

## CONFLICT

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been living a bloody civil war for over 20 years. A struggle between rebel groups and forces loyal to the government, in a tangle of ethnicities and ethnic groups. It has killed more than 6 million people. Attacks on the civilian population with executions, rape and kidnapping are frequent.

Felix lived in a small village in northern Congo. One day his village was attacked by a rebel group. Almost all the inhabitants of the village were killed or kidnapped. Felix was one of the men kidnapped. In order not to be executed, he was forced to fight alongside the rebels for 18 months. “One day, when attacking a village, the forces loyal to the government were waiting for us”. The attack was strongly repelled. Felix and his comrades had to retreat. Felix took advantage of the retreat and escaped towards Rwanda. His wife was also kidnapped. To this day he does not know of her whereabouts. The two children of Felix stayed with his mother.

**I escaped and walked until I crossed the border, to survive.**

## ESCAPE AND ARRIVAL IN PORTUGAL

As soon as he had escaped, Felix began a walk toward the Rwandan border. He crossed the border and found an institution of Russian Priests. At first, the priests were suspicious of him. They knew he had fought for the rebels, but they were not sure of his story. The Priests contacted another religious institution in the Congo to make sure that Felix was reliable.

# THE STORIES: FELIX

Through the Congo priests, Felix also had confirmation that his children were alive and safe with his mother. He knew then that a couple from Finland sent some money to his mother so she could escape with the children to the capital, Kinshasa. They live there today, but Felix fears for the safety of his family. *“The war continues!”*

Accompanied by a Russian priest and through the Russian institution to which the priest belonged, Felix then went to Russia. When he arrived in Russia, the priests of this Catholic institution advised him to apply for refugee status. With the help of these priests, he made the request, but the Russian government rejected it and recommended him to apply for a temporary visa in Finland. His application has been submitted and accepted by the Finnish embassy.

He arrived in Finland, with a temporary visa, but was not granted refugee status in the country. He was advised to apply for asylum at the Portuguese embassy. The Portuguese government accepted his request granting him refugee status. At the end of 2015 Felix moved to Portugal.

**I had to open to the host society and had to have a desire to integrate.**

## NEW BELONGING AND LIFE IN LISBON

He arrived in Lisbon without knowing much about Portugal. The little he knew had learned in geography classes, nothing more. At the beginning it was very difficult. *“I was alone and could not communicate in Portuguese”*. He went to the Portuguese Council for Refugees<sup>1</sup> (CPR), where he began the study of Portuguese. He started making friends and always insisted on speaking Portuguese with them.

He discovered in the CPR a library where he could read books of Portuguese literature. He spent many hours inside the library and after a while was invited to be responsible for the CPR library. One day he was invited to participate also in

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cpr.pt>

<sup>2</sup> <http://refugiados.net/1cpr/www/refugiacto10anos.php>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fcsh.unl.pt/formacao-ao-longo-da-vida/cursos-de-linguas>

the theater of the CPR, activity that maintains until today. *“I had never thought of being an actor, much less to play theater!”* It was a great way to learn Portuguese and also to stop thinking about his past life. *“In the theater I can laugh, talk, chat with other. I can communicate who I was and who I am now”*.

*“My story can help a lot of people. When I arrived I thought that I could never live as I do today. I managed to integrate myself and I think I have a great future”*. He currently works at a customer support company (Mac Call Center). Gives information on mobile phones, tablets and computers. He makes customer service in French.

He also discovered another environment. He realized that here, women, unlike in his country, share the work at home. *“So I had to learn how to take care of the house, cooking, things a man from my country would not do. Women get tired the same way men do, so we have to share work at home.”*

He tries always to be busy so *“I do not have time to think hard about my pains”*. He lives alone and during his free time reads, studies and walks. Is ending the Portuguese level 2 in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the New University of Lisboa<sup>3</sup>, allowing him to enter a university course in social sciences of the University.

## EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

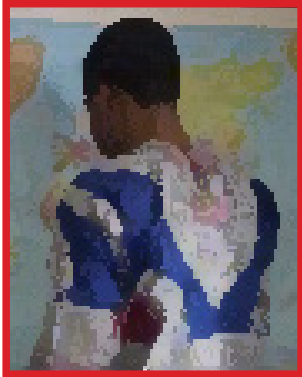
In addition to the theater and the social science course, *“I would like to participate in a group where. I could tell my experiences and make people see the refugees with different eyes...”*

*Who lived his early steps and it was bad, like me, can live the second steps and be good”*.

**By sharing common interest I created bonds.**



# THE STORIES: CONTEH



First name: **LAMIN**

Last name: **CONTEH**

Age: **22**

Country of origin: **GAMBIA**

Living in **Italy** since: **2014**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Born in The Gambia, at the age of 10 Conteh's parents sent him to Mauritania to study Qur'an and Arabic. When he came back to The Gambia, he started working as a teacher. He had problems and my life was in danger, so he had to leave his country. After a very difficult journey through West Africa, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea, he eventually arrived to Italy. Little by little, he learned the language and started understanding the way of living in Italy. Conteh was married in 2016 and can now plan for a better future.

## "A LITTLE BIT OF MY STORY"

### CONTEH'S STORY

Conteh was born in The Gambia. His father was a businessman and a practised traditional medicine. When he was 10 years old, his family sent him to Mauritania to study the Qur'an and the Arabic language. He had a project in mind: to create a school in his town for children who couldn't afford school fees. So when Conteh was 17 and returned to The Gambia, he started planning for his project and worked in a school in his town, Bundung.

### CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

But after a while, Conteh started experiencing some problems that couldn't be solved by the institutions, because in his country there is a lot of corruption and injustice. The situation became worse and worse, until his own life was in danger and he had to leave Gambia.

He travelled through different West African countries, from Senegal to Mali by bus; to Mali to Burkina Faso, to Niger. Then he was told that the war in Libya had ended, so he decided to go there, because he thought he could work there with his Arabic and religious knowledge.

But he found this decision to be wrong. A nightmare began when he had to take a journey through the desert. He suffered from a terrible and deadly dangerous crossing. He was eventually picked up and stuffed in a pick-up truck so full with people he even couldn't breathe. Some people died. They didn't give him water as you had to take your own. The traffickers told them it would be one day travel, but in fact it was one week. The first city he arrived in was Gadron where he started to regret his decision to go to Libya. He was kidnapped with other people. They thought he couldn't speak their language, but Conteh could understand them, and learnt that they wanted to sell them to someone. Conteh told his friends that they wanted to sell them, and so tried to escape. They found a way to escape, but couldn't remain in that city, because they would find them, so he moved to Tripoli. Conteh found that living in Libya was even more dangerous than Gambia.

Because if this he decided to take the sea, because he knew how dangerous it could be to go back, and so the arduous journey across the sea seemed like the better option.

**He suffered from a terrible and deadly dangerous crossing.**

# THE STORIES: CONTEH

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

When arriving in Italy, Conteh stayed for a while in a camp with many other people. It was difficult to understand what was going on, because they weren't told anything about the organization and they were guarded by security service. One day Conteh and a few others were picked up by police and took to the airport with a bus escorted by two police vehicles. They were put on an airplane and were not even allowed to go to the toilet. At that point Conteh told himself that there were no difference between where he was from and where he was then.

But thanks to the Association and the good people he met things started getting better.

A teacher started coming to see him and giving him Italian lessons. In the beginning it was difficult because in his school back in Gambia he only learnt English and French. He struggled to improve himself as much he could to communicate with people.

He didn't have many cultural problems because he left his country to study when he was ten, so he is quite used to staying in a foreign place and to deal with new cultures.

Conteh still had some problems because things are not so well organized here and commitments are sometimes not fulfilled.

Conteh and his companions sometimes had to ask for explanation because they were not given complete information on their situation or on the Italian system. When this happened, they acted as a group. Being a group and able to share their problems has been the way they are able to get through difficulties here in Italy, and helped them to understand better the culture they are living in. They are now meeting good people in the city where they live.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Little by little, Conteh has found ways to continue dealing with his interests: reading, football, visiting new friends, helping people.

He has also discovered new passions for theatre. This has allowed him to meet new friends and also Italian friends too. With them he shares time talking and eating together, but also in social activities and commitment.

Conteh is still studying Italian, but also achieving Italian diplomas and qualifications to be able to develop his work opportunities. At the moment he works as a cultural mediator for the Association which welcomed him in the beginning. He enjoys this work, although it is sometimes difficult to deal with all the different situations he faces.

In 2016 Conteh met an Italian woman and they got married later that year. They are planning a future here and in The Gambia. In the future they would like to be able to spend their lives both in Italy and in The Gambia.

**His passion  
for theatre helped  
him to find new  
friends.**



# THE STORIES: ABDUL



First name: **ABDUL**

Last name: **KHALED**

Age: **36**

Country of origin: **AFGHANISTAN**

Living in **Greece** since: **2002**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Abdul was born in a village near Kabul, Afghanistan in 1981. He has a sister who lives in the UK. His mother still lives in Afghanistan and he has lost his father. After fleeing Afghanistan, he went through an Odyssey before he finally integrated into the Greek society. His story until he managed to consider himself as a part of the community is sad, however full of glimpses of hope.

## “DO YOU HAVE A PASSPORT?”

### ABDUL’S STORY

He left Afghanistan in 1999, while still in school, after his father was assassinated because of his political beliefs and his life was in danger. He passed the borders with Iran alone and spent in Tehran two and a half years in the house of a relative of his. Convinced that there is no future for him there, since he had no rights and opportunities he abandoned the country trying to reach Istanbul. When arrived, he found some fellows from Afghanistan who

helped him to find a job in order to buy a small inflatable boat, his “ticket” to cross the sea borders with Greece. He stayed in Turkey for one month, where he was able to earn a small amount of money. Some of his fellows already knew the route to the borders and joined them until the beach. It was the first time in his life that saw the sea and he was anxious for the upcoming passage, because he did not know how to paddle. He and his fellows, among them Said, an Afghani whom Abdul met in Istanbul and considered him as his friend, waited until the night. Said was smoking his cigarette, watching the lights of Chios (an island near the borders) and was telling Abdul that the day after they would find themselves in Europe.

### THE PASSAGE TO EUROPE

Along with other 13 people, they got onboard on 3 boats (he was with a family of five — a mother and her four children) at 1:00 o’clock in the night and began their journey through the Aegean Sea. After a couple of hours, they saw some very big waves coming onto the boats and Abdul, as the only man on his boat, tried to take control of it, but he was not able to turn the boat. As a result, the water overflowed the boat but fortunately it did not sink. After the storm has passed, they were not aware about the position of the other boats. They were exhausted and tired, but they saw the beach and started hoping again. They arrived at Chios at 10 o’clock in the morning, without knowing where the other boats were and stopped by a cafeteria by the beach in order to buy something to eat. Someone from the cafeteria called the police and after 10 minutes two policemen arrived and asked, “*have you your passport?*”. It was the first phrase he heard. He did not know what a passport is, since he

The wife of my employer cooked a fresh meal every day for us.

# THE STORIES: ADBUL

left from a war zone illegally and he did not know nothing about the official procedures. He answered, *"I am from Afghanistan"*, they asked him again, he said no and along with the family (all of the children and their mother were crying) he entered the police car. The policeman opened the door of the car and said welcome. Abdul then realized that it was the first time that someone was so kind to him and started hoping that he really is in a European country whose authorities are kind, helpful and treat the others with dignity. When he arrived at the police station, the chief of the police department, with the help of an Iranian interpreter, asked him if he knew where the other boats were. He didn't know and the chief started yelling and pushing him. They detained him with other refugees who were in the police department and although it was hot outside, they kept turning the air-condition volume to the highest temperature, making their accommodation in the cell a living hell. He stayed in the cell for 2 nights and then he transferred to a camp operated by the UNHCR where other Afghans were moved and where the conditions were more humane. He later learned that one of the two other boats were sunk and his passengers were collected by an Egyptian ship travelling to Bosphorus. All of them were alive, except from Said who was drown in the Aegean waters. He stayed in the site for three months and took a document which allowed him to travel along Greece along with a ticket to Athens.

When he arrived at Athens, he visited Victoria Square, where other refugees stayed and asked where he could sleep, because he was exhausted. They sent him in a park, where he saw other people sleeping on benched and the floor. He felt lost, hopeless, without gravity and could not believe the state he was living in. Some of the refugees in the park were staying in an abandoned house which he tried to enter, but the others prohibited the entrance and did not let him stay. After some days had passed, sleeping on the benches

and having lost his hopes, an employer who was exploiting refugees, making them work illegally, without insurance and social security, paying them €5 for a twelve-hour work, proposed him to work in a place outside Athens. Having in mind that this was his only option, Abdul bought a ticket and went to Thebes, where the employer waited him in the station and transferred him to an agricultural region with crops. It was at night and he was led him to a place with tents, where other Afghans were staying, sleeping on the floor. However, he was happy, because he finally found someone from his country and living in the same situation. The day after, he was transferred in a field in order to collect tomatoes, among other unknown people, under the hot sun. After two weeks of this routine they stopped working and were told to pack the tents. In the meantime, he and his fellows had found another employer and found an abandoned house to stay. They had no electricity, no water and they lighted up fires when they wanted to cook or to be heated. One night, he was feeling so dirty and he could not stand himself, so he went to the terrace of the house and found a pond with rain waters and he washed himself with the water from the pond. He spent 5 months in total in Thebes and his last employer has paid them only half of the amount that had agreed upon.

## TRYING TO FLEE GREECE

Not being able to take it anymore, Abdul decided to leave the country through Italy. He travelled to Patras (from where the ships to Italy departed) and spend his first night under the stars. He was receiving a daily meal from the church and was trying to find ways to get onboard illegally, since he had no papers. One day, he tried to hide himself in the floor of a truck which was going to Italy. When an officer found him during a control in the truck started beating him with punches and kicks to his head. Since he could not resist using



# THE STORIES: ADBUL

violence he started screaming and the officer left him alone. Losing his hopes that he would not been able to leave Greece, along with five other fellows, he went to Sparta, where they were able to find a job in the fields, collecting oranges. He stayed there for 8 months and then returned to Athens (in 2004). He went to apply for asylum, however in the police station the refugees were beaten, so, he left the department. Returning to the park, someone proposed to stay in an apartment with 14 other refugees, asking from each one €65 per month! Through his roommates he managed to find a job, placing tiles in houses, as a member of a crew, managed by a very good man, Mr. Nikos, who was Greek and helped him a lot to learn the skills and the language. His wife was cooking every day a fresh meal for Abdul and Mr. Nikos helped him to develop him professionally and to set up his own business in placing tiles during 2006, when Abdul was given the pink card (asylum claim) and could issue his documents (bank account, social security number and so on). Abdul managed a crew of four people in his own business, he bought a car, he was able to live in dignity and in a nice house.

**I do not  
complain about  
the bad moments,  
they make me  
stronger.**

## FINANCIAL CRISIS IN GREECE

Greek economy was hit extremely hard by the economic crisis, fact that affected Abdul's business. He could not repay his loans, he could not pay his employees and within a year he practically lost everything. It was then when decided to abandon Greece once more, having in his pocket some savings (about €1500). He decided to follow an alternative route, not from Italy, but from FYROM with three other friends of his. In the borders between FYROM and Serbia, the authorities of the latter caught them, they threatened them

with their guns, they stole a large portion of their savings and sent them back to Greece. When arrived in Greece, they went back to FYROM and passed the borders with Serbia. In Serbia, some smugglers proposed them to transfer them by a taxi to Hungary, asking each one of them €500. They paid them, however the Serbians moved the group to Kosovo, instead of Hungary (!) they told them to get out of the car and left, where some armed men arrested them and searched them in order to find money. Since they had not any on them, they released them.

He somehow managed to get on a train with direction to Austria. During the journey he has been asked by the ticket collector to show them his passport. He only showed his pink card, which had already been expired and when he got off the train in Austria, he was transferred to a police department in Vienna. During his stay in Austria he was transferred from authority to authority for 45 days, from one cell to another, having terrifying nightmares when finally he was able to sleep. After they found out that he had departed from Greece, he was deported to Athens, he felt that he was in Afghanistan, his hometown, feeling free.

## BEING PART OF THE COMMUNITY

In 2012, he obtained the refugee status and joined the Afghan community in Athens as a member of the Board, decided to help other people to integrate in the Greek society and to avoid the situation he has been himself. He enrolled in an on line Greek course offered by the University of Athens and through the community he has managed to find a job, working in an advertising company, placing plexiglass ads. Two years later, he registered in senior high school and although he had not documents, the director of the school communicated with the Ministry of Education, confirming that he could attend the classes

# THE STORIES: ADBUL

and helped him with his lessons. The first time he listened to the school bell ringing after 19 years, the voices and the laughter of his classmates, he felt that he was born again. In the meantime, he left the job at the advertising company and joined the department of interpreters in the Ecumenical Refugees Programme in Athens. In the community he is responsible for the cultural projects. He also gives directions to the newcomers for the documents necessary in order for them to be enrolled in school. Only this year, under his guidance, 6 refugees were registered in Greek schools and encourages the members of the community to get involved in actions and activities that will help them integrate into the Greek society.

After his adventure and fifteen years since he stepped foot on Greek soil, he states that his integration was difficult, but worth it. "Language is one's identity. When you speak the same language as the society you live in and your attitude is nice, no one judges you by your appearance and your colour, no one sees you as a foreigner. I have met many Greeks who treated me right and I do not complain for the bad moments, such events make you stronger". He currently is engaged and he hopes to create his family in Athens and is waiting for his application to obtain the Greek citizenship. He plans to pass the exams for the University and acquire the skills for a job that will enable him to help other people and make the society better.

# THE STORIES: SBAH



First name: **SHEIKHOMAR**

Last name: **BAH**

Age: **20**

Country of origin: **GAMBIA**

Living in **Italy** since: **2014**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Sheikhoma Bah (Sbah) is from The Gambia. He left his country because of problems which occurred within his father's family. So he left The Gambia in search of a better and more peaceful life. He travel from Gambia to Libya then took the decision to pay for a boat to Europe. For three days they sailed in the Mediterranean Sea not knowing where they were or where they were going. On the fourth day they were rescued by a large ship and brought to Italy.

## "... MAKE LOVE RAINS"

### SBAH'S STORY

Sheikhomar Bah is from The Gambia and left his country because of problems which occurred within his father's family, due to a dispute over land given to his father by his grandfather before he died. Sbah's uncle and fathers brothers, were not happy about this decision and decide to argue and fight with Sbah's father so that they could take the land for themselves. Initially they decide

to talk to my father first about the land to try and come to an agreement, but after talking with him they still couldn't agree with the decision. One day the brothers decided to call Sbah's father for a meeting late at night. Sbah urged his father don't go as he felt it was unsafe and too late at night to meet people like his brothers as they are not good people. Sbah's father told him not to worry, that nothing will happen and went to meet with his brothers. Later that evening Sbahs father returned home suffering from injuries which had been inflicted upon him by his brothers. He was immediately admitted to hospital and a police report made against the brothers. Sbahs father later died in hospital from his injuries. One year later the brothers came to their house to talk to Sbah's mother about his father's properties and land. His mother told them to go speak with Sheikhomar as he is the only male son of his father and inherited his father's land and properties. Sbah refused to give the land to his uncles because he wanted it in order to look after his mother and to earn money for his sister's education. As a result of this Sbah became fearful that his uncles would inflict the same injuries to him as they did to his father.

### CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

Sbah's mother told him to try and leave the country to avoid the fate of his father. He did not think twice about this and followed his mother's advice. In doing so he has made it difficult for his uncles to claim the land as they are unable to make the agreement while he is in another country. So he left The Gambia in search of a better and more peaceful life.

Initially Sbah left The Gambia and traveled to Senegal. He soon realized that it was too difficult for him to live in Senegal and he moved to Mali, where he

**My friends in Italy see me as a brother.**

# THE STORIES: SBAH

stayed for a while but soon realized that actually the opportunities were not much better than in Senegal and he moved forward to Burkina Fasso where he stayed for a short while. Whilst there he met people heading to Libya in search of work and a better future and security. In order to find money to travel to Libya, Sabh headed to Niger to find work. Eventually he made enough money to pay for a pickup truck to take him to Libya and finally to Tripoli. Once there Sbah was surprised by how people were suffering there. Sbah then took the decision to pay for a boat to Europe. For three days they sailed in the Mediterranean Sea not knowing where they were or where they were going. On the fourth day they were rescued by a large ship and brought to Italy.

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

Sbah was initially surprised by the welcoming in Italy. *'It was a dream come true I see how Italians welcome me they were very nice to us we arrived in Pozzallo Sicily.'* They took him and the others from the boat to an Emergency camp where they could eat, shower and a bed where we could sleep. *'It was the most beautiful thing someone have done for me and the people of Sicilia were very nice to us, they make us feel like we home, it was the most beautiful thing.'* There Sbah began to learn the language which he found difficult and felt he would never able to speak this language. He then moved to Foligno for a few days. Sbah found people in Foligno to be nice and friendly, and was humbled by this. *'It's not easy to go to a place and expect everyone will like you. Of course some will like you, and some will not. But I try to adopt their culture.'* Sbah started going to school to continue to learn the language. He is now able to talk with any Italian without feeling any pressure. *'I love Italy. I love their culture and I love the people.'*

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Currently Sbah is going to school in Foligno to completed his education. He is working as a help cook in a restaurant in Foligno. He is also working on a voluntary basis with 'Caritas' to help others refugees to integrate in Foligno. He now has a permit to stay in Italy with Humanitarian protection, and would like to be a mechanic or a football player. He is part of a theater group at ZOE GARAGE at ZUT. He is also part of music band of African traditional music mixed with jazz, created in Foligno in 2016 called '**Gan Scorpions**'. It is composed by five people from Gambia and two Italians, one of them a very prestigious pianist called Giovanni Guide. Sbah has many Italian friends in Foligno. They are so nice to him and they all see him as a brother and as a friend, and he has a lot of love for them, and in return they also love him too.

*'I fought and put my life at risk to be here and that does not mean I do not love my country. I love my country more than any other place in the world. And, I love my family more than any other thing is this whole world and I always wish to be with them for the rest of my life. But do not forget, when you plan something, God is also planning something else for you.'*

*I never wished to leave my family but no one can know what will happen tomorrow and the difficulties that may arise. When the trouble comes to you try to face them because your life is much more precious.*

*I left my country for my own safety. I have traveled so far away. The journey made me know ledgable and I learned so many things, too many. I've seen things I would never have expected. I have experienced life. I learned to understand people. I learned to know what's going on in different parts of the world.*

**I learned to love.**

*Now, I am in Italy.*

# THE STORIES: SBAH

*Here there are people who appreciate me but others do not. But in this world you cannot be loved by all. I have a reason to be here. Some people understand. Others do not, instead, stops on the street and tells you “Negro, go back to your country”.*

*People who do not know how to love. People who do not know how difficult life can be.*

*You will suffer by hearing all these names, much more worse. But you still need to try and build your own life. They do not know that this world doesn't come with borders, we the human build them to keep others out.*

*Today many bad things are happening in this world and is all because of hatred.*

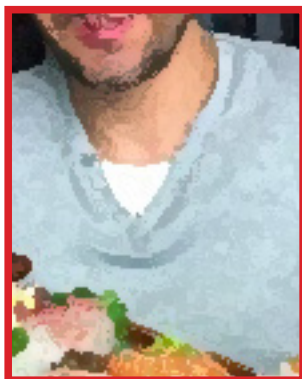
***Let's try together to build love and make love rains in this world. As they say: United we stand stronger, divided we fall.***

***Let's make love rains in this world'***

*Sheikhoma Bah*

**When  
the trouble comes  
to you, try to face them  
because your  
life is much  
more precious.**

# THE STORIES: ARTAN



First name: **ARTAN**

Last name: **CAMI**

Age: **25**

Country of origin: **ALBANIA**

Living in **Italy** since: **2005**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Artan was too young when he was forced to leave Albania. His parents decided that he must move to Italy in order to have a better future. The situation by them was very dangerous as criminal groups armed themselves and took control of entire cities. At the beginning was very hard to adapt to the new environment as he was alone and at a very young age. However, his determination to overcome obstacle took him to where he is now. He has built his life in Italy and feels home.

## “... LOOKING FOR ANSWERS”

### ARTANS’ STORY – CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

Artan was 12 years when he was forced to leave his country. By then he was too young to understand why his life was taking a direction he could not control. The Opening of the depots occurred in the north of Albania for protection against the violence of the south. The decision was taken by the President

Berisha. When southern Albanian bases were looted, it was estimated that, on average, every male from the age of ten years upwards, possessed at least one firearm and ample ammunition. In order to protect the civilians in north and central Albania, the government allowed civilians to arm themselves from government arms depots. During the rebellion 656,000 weapons of various types, along with 1.5 billion rounds of ammunition, 3.5 million hand grenades and one million land mines, were looted from army depots.

This situation created a huge fear among citizens. *‘I remembered the silence broke at nights because of the shooting and mum trying to calm me down to protect me.’* During that period a lot of Artans’ family friends were killed. *‘We could not walk in peace on the streets, as people could be killed at any moment and time of the day.’* The area where Artan was living was controlled by a dangerous gang, drugs dealers and prostitution. Families were very scared all the time.

Because of this situation Artan’s family tried to escape, but the economic situation didn’t allow them. Artan’s mum found out that the Albanian Football Federation Tirana in collaboration with corrupted political parties offered the possibility to minors to leave of the country. The price was 4,000 Euros, which was a huge amount of money at that time. By paying this amount minors could take a week football training course in Germany. The truth was that when children left to Germany, they were left abandoned in different cities in Italy, so they could find a new life. Artan was one of them. *‘I was 12 years old, alone in Brindisi. I didn’t understand what I was doing there, and why? But my mum said that I was going to have a better future’*

**Artans sheer determination to not relive the life under fear gave him the motivation to push himself to integrate**



# THE STORIES: ARTAN

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

*'It took me a while to understand my situation. My parents believe that I was going to be happier in Italy, but I wasn't at the beginning. I missed my family and friends.'*

When Artan arrived in Italy he couldn't speak the language. He felt very isolated for many years. He was scared and became depressed. Social Services took him to a minor's community center.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Immediately Artan began studying the Italian language. *'It was very frustrating not to understand, but I wanted and needed to learn. I spent hours alone in front of the television repeating out loud every word heard even if I couldn't understand the meaning.'* Artan wanted to learn the language desperately, so he could pursue his dreams and have the better future for himself and his parents.

At the age of 17 Artan was granted the study permissions documents. By then he could speak Italian fluently, and so he enrolled in a 3 years vocational training course to become a chef at a tourism school.

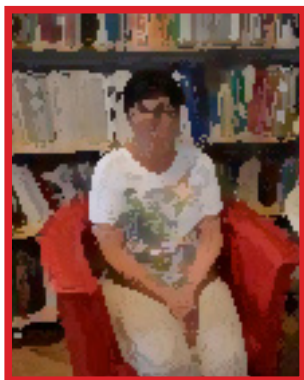
*'During the course all the students were Italian, and at first I felt I didn't belong to that school even if my determination to study was a lot. Then, over time they started to trust me, they understood I was not **just an Albanian but a person like them who wanted to create a better future and slowly we respect each other.***

Artan tried his best at school, and at the end he obtained the highest final grades. He became a really good model student. This success opened new

**I spent hours alone in front of the television trying to learn the language.**

possibilities, and he managed to get job in a very prestigious restaurant. He now feels he belongs to the Italian culture. *'Italy is home, my life is here.'*

# THE STORIES: VESNA



First name: **VESNA**

Last name: **DOŠEN**

Age: **54**

Country of origin: **BOSNIA**

Living in **Slovenia** since: **1987**

## SHORT SUMMARY

When Vesna was 22, she left Ključ, her home town to discover Croatia and later Slovenia. One could say that at the very beginning she was an economic migrant, but no! In those days Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia were three out of six Yugoslav republics and constituent parts of the same country. In 1992 a war broke out in Bosnia and war atrocities began for her family. Vesna was in Slovenia in those days having a good job in a printing house in Ljubljana but fearing for the life of her relatives. Finally they escaped to Croatia. Vesna's employer went bankrupt, she was jobless. She decided to set up her own company offering cleaning services to different clients. She continued working hard. There were many formalities to overcome. But she managed. Since then, she's been working for Slovenian Third Age University and other clients. At the age of 52 she met Ivan, her partner and she moved with him in his family house, 60 km from Ljubljana where she travels each day.

*"That's life",* she says, speaking about her life so far, knowing that there are things that cannot be changed. On the contrary, what she could change she did change.

Vesna is a refugee role model since despite all the hardships she has developed a positive and engaging attitude towards life, evaluating possibilities, making things happen. She has close ties with her family, but not Bosnia and her native town now destroyed and deserted.

*"Learning the language of the host country is a must",* she says.

Being flexible, adapting with joy and curiosity is an advantage.

## HOME IS WHERE MY MOTHER IS, HOME IS WHERE IVAN IS

### VESNA'S STORY

In 1985 Vesna was 22 when with her father's help she left Ključ, her home town, and her family to go away and see new places and meet new people. Curious and enterprising, she first went to the neighbouring Croatia, stayed there some time, but Slovenia was for her the country to go. In 1987 she started working in a printing house. It was a good job. She liked it. This was before the war in Bosnia broke out.

Vesna says that she has never been truly fond of the Bosnian landscape. She spent her childhood and youth in Ključ, a small locality with only 300 catholic Croats like herself. The others were Muslims or Serbs, though when she was a child such attributes were not important. She was somehow not attracted by the region around Ključ. In her eyes, Slovenia has always been the most beautiful country in the world, so green, so hilly and mountainous.

Vesna arrived in Ljubljana, settled down in Fužine, then Rudnik, then



# THE STORIES: VESNA

Vižmarje, different areas of the city. Then she moved to Medvode a small locality near Ljubljana. Moving from one place to another has never been a problem for her curious mind and engaging soul, rather an opportunity. But in 1992, when the war broke out in Bosnia, her living in Ljubljana was no more a matter of choice. She lived there out of necessity, at her sister's place. *"I will be thankful till the end. She helped me so much."*

Vesna worked for good companies and associations, had a good job till her employer went bankrupt and she became jobless. She set up her own company, Her company has been offering cleaning services to the Slovenian Third Age University and other clients. At the age of 52 she met Ivan. Now, home is where Ivan is. Talking to Vesna one easily recalls the title of a popular song *"I owe thanks to my life, for having given me so much"*.

## CONFLICT

In 1992 when the war broke out in Bosnia, Vesna was in Slovenia, fearing for her relatives, friends and neighbours' life with all the war atrocities going on in Bosnia. Her family was in Ključ. People left one after another. Some didn't. Some day her relatives went to the barn. They opened the door and found Vesna's father dead, hanging on a beam. He had hung himself or had been hung. The family would never know for sure.

## ESCAPE

So, they decided to go away. Evacuated, they travelled by bus to Croatia carrying a small plastic bag in which were to be stored all their belongings. Vesna's mother had managed to sew in her dress some precious jewellery. In Croatia they moved from one place to another before they finally settled down in Varaždin. Today her mother's home there is one of Vesna's two

emotional homes. Bosnia with all sad stories had been left behind. There is nobody there anymore. They are all displaced, scattered somewhere in the world or dead now.

## BELONGING

Vesna maintains close and continuous contact with her family. Family ties matter for her. Vesna says *"Home is where my mother is - Varaždin in Croatia and where Ivan is - in Slovenia"*. When Vesna's last employer went bankrupt, she, like many others, was jobless and had to cope with the situation. She decided she would set up her own company offering cleaning and other services. There were many formalities to accomplish and overcome, but she managed. She had to employ an accountant. Ever since Vesna has been working for Slovenian Third Age University and some other clients. She is a good worker, diligent and joyful, appreciated by the students and the staff. She is rarely ill or rather she goes on working despite being ill. She says she misses the staff and students, her work so much, lying in bed. One might say she is not talkative, though she has a good command of Slovenian. *"If you come to another country, you have to speak the same language, you simply have to learn it. This is a must"*. There are Bosnians who do not speak Slovene, because their language is widely understood, but Vesna thinks that one has to learn the language of the country. Absolutely! She has difficulties understanding different dialects. But who hasn't?

Vesna says she had not been lucky *"in love"*; she simply had not met the right person, but recently she has met Ivan and obviously she is happy about this new situation. *"It feels good sharing joy with somebody"*. Ivan is Slovene with *"Slovenian mentality"* but Vesna likes him to be different. She has always

**Maintaining family ties is essential.**

# THE STORIES: VESNA

appreciated diversity. Now, they both live in his 200 year old family house. Vesna considers herself to be a peasant, a country girl. She learned at an early age how to milk cows, make cheese, butter, how to grow vegetables, cultivate soil. Ivan's house has become Vesna's home. There is silence around her village Višnje, situated in a beautiful part of Slovenia, 60 km from Ljubljana. Each day she travels to Ljubljana... she does not mind! One can feel she has roots now, in Slovenia, in Ivan's life, in Ivan's house, their home.

Vesna maintains ties with her family her sister and her four grown up nephews. One day she took Ivan to Bosnia to show him where she comes from. But they found the place destroyed, deserted, many people having left the town or died of natural causes.

## MILESTONES AND STRATEGIES SUPPORTING VESNA'S INCLUSION

She came to Slovenia before the war started, wanting to come. She had a good job in a printing house. She became jobless and created her own company. She helped her family leave war atrocities behind and come to Croatia. She has a curious mind and is exclusively focused on the present and future. *"What cannot be changed should not be dealt with!"* Finding a "sister soul", a partner, means being happy. Being flexible, adapting with joy and curiosity is an advantage. One has to find the right, suitable natural environment. Maintaining family ties is essential. Learning the language of the host society is a must.

**Learning  
the language of  
the host society  
is a must.**

# THE STORIES: NOUR



First name: **NOUR**

Last name: **MACHLAH**

Age: **27**

Country of origin: **SYRIA**

Living in **Portugal** since: **2014**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Nour Machlah (Syrian), a 27-year-old architecture master student, fled Syria and the armed conflict and arrived in Portugal in 2014, after a visit to Lebanon and Turkey, where he failed to realize his dream of continuing to study architecture. As he has been the target of people's ignorance, he begins making various speeches in Portugal and Europe relating to integration process of immigrants and refugees, Human Rights, peace and war, cross culture and religious dialogue and life and happiness. He was invited to speak in the European Parliament. He contributed ideas regarding the new asylum law and migration and integration processes in Europe. He is Member of the European Migrant Advisory Board (Representing Portugal) as an advisor on the European and local level.

He managed to bring his mother and brother to Portugal, where he is creating his future and want to be happy .

**“I WANT TO BE THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS!”**

## THE CONFLICT

The war began and the first bombings took place in Aleppo when Nour, still with his family, was studying architecture. *“I was in the middle of the war! I fled because I did not want to fight, I did not want to die, and I did not want to kill anyone. Everything was very confusing”.*

He then interrupted his architectural studies and with the support of his father, who has been living in England since 1998, decided to leave the country.

## THE ESCAPE

Nour left Aleppo in 2012. He escape to Lebanon, Beirut, and a place where he could get a visa for England. He went alone, staying the rest of the family in Aleppo.

The early days were very hard for Nour. He had no work and felt some animosity on the part of the Lebanese against him. *“There was a part of the Lebanese who did not like us”.* A month later the younger brother joined him. At first he did not work. His father told him that *“it was a temporary place”.* He tried 2 times a visa to England and was rejected in both. *“Although my father has lived in England since 1998, I was simply a Syrian to them”.* He spent 7 months in Lebanon, and disillusioned went to Ankara, Turkey.

In Ankara, he started looking for a solution. He realised that people didn't trust him, but he was lucky because got a job on the third day in Ankara. But his salary was too low and he could not study. He realised that he had to leave Turkey. In the meantime, he met the ambassador from Brazil, who wanted to help him. *“I give you a visa for Brazil,*

**I fled because I did not want to fight, I did not want to die, and I did not want to kill anyone**

# THE STORIES: NOUR

*for you and for your brother”.*

Before taking the visa, he found on the internet a platform to help Syrian students who wanted to continue their studies in Portugal. He applied for the scholarship programme, he and his brother.

He lost hope when he realised that many other people has equally applied. He accepted the visa to Brazil, but the day before the purchase of the ticket to Brazil, he received an email from Lisbon, informing that they had been accepted to study in Portugal, through the platform created by the former President of the Portuguese Republic, Jorge Sampaio<sup>1</sup>. On February 28th, 2014, he arrived in Portugal.

## NEW BELONGINGS AND INCLUSION

He recommenced his studies in architecture, practically from scratch. He was well received at the university, although in the early days he felt very much the cultural differences. *“Portuguese language is not hard, a very romantic language, but my problem with it was always the grammar, and because of the busy schedule of architecture classes I really couldn’t find much time for Portuguese classes (even if I study in Portuguese) but for me the language here can tell you a lot about this country culture in two different sides, the Arabic touch in the Portuguese language and also the Portuguese way of talking, for me the language is a very important part of the culture. Many things are similar to my culture and many things are different as well”.*

He realised that people do not know much about Syria and the Syrians. He heard joke about him and his people *“Do you have a bomb with you? It’s a joke, but it’s painful. Why did I have to hear that? Just because I was born in another part of the world? But on the other hand, I had found the place in the world where I could find answers! It is always hard to be judged by people, especially*

*in the wrong way. But I have to give an answer, so people would change the way they think about me! I began to talk more with the small community where I lived, who got to know more about me, more about my country”.*

Following these conversations, Nour began receiving invitations to speak at conferences and universities. *“I am invited to talk about war, peace, terrorism, being a Muslim, and other issues. It was very funny sometimes. I never wanted to talk about human rights, I wanted to talk about motivation”.*

One day he received an email from the European Parliament inviting him to make a speech in the tribune of this Parliament.

## PUBLIC FIGURE

He made a forceful **speech in the European Parliament** giving a greater visibility for the work he had been doing in Portugal.

Nour met personally Dr. Pedro Calado, High Commissioner for Migration/ACM, with whom he collaborates in favour of the refugees in Portugal. Contacts and working together with other European institutions are intensified. After his second speech to the European Parliament, invitations to speak and visit other countries increased even more. He is TEDx speaker as well, had given a **TEDx** talk during TEDx Porto event, addressing the topic of Stereotype. He becomes a well-known figure in the European and Portuguese media and institutions working with refugees.

## EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Recently Nour was able to bring his mother and young brother to live with him in Portugal. The rest of the family is already living safely in other countries. His concerns are now focused on helping others: *“I want to be the voice of the voiceless!”*

<sup>1</sup> <http://jorgesampaio.pt/jorgesampaio/pt/>

# THE STORIES: NOUR

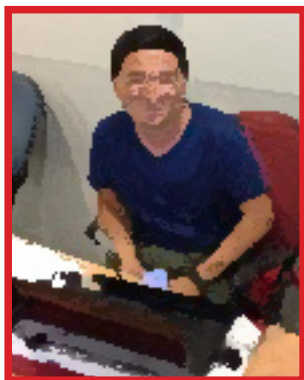
Currently he feels really Portuguese. And to complete this feeling of belonging, he hopes that soon his request will be positively deferred and his Portuguese citizenship recognised.

Nour intends now, in partnership with Dr. Pedro Calado (ACM), to deepen his work in Portugal and to finish his studies briefly and come to work as an Architect.

*"I realized that I want to contribute more to Portugal".*

**I am invited  
to talk about war,  
peace, terrorism, being  
a Muslim, and other  
issues**

# THE STORIES: GHOLAM



First name: **GHOLAM**

Last name: **HASSANPOUR**

Age: **27**

Country of origin: **AFGHANISTAN**

Living in **Greece** since: **2006**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Gholam was born in Afghanistan during the war with Russia. He has an older brother and during the outbreak of the civil war he and his family travelled to Iran in order to find a better place to live. However, Iran was proven to be a hostile ground for the citizens of Afghanistan and once more, he was obliged to move, this time alone, to another so called “safe” country.

## “FLEEING WAS MY ONLY OPTION”

### GHOLAM’S STORY

Born in 1990, Gholam lived in Afghanistan for about ten years. During the civil war and after the US invasion in the country (2001 - 2002) his family decided to abandon its home, moving to Tehran, Iran, trying to find better living and political conditions. Nevertheless, in Iran, Afghans don’t have access to justice or to educational institutions and they practically have no rights, thus it could be stated that they are entrapped in a limbo.

Knowing that abandoning Iran was his only option, Gholam left Tehran, reaching the borders of Turkey, where he was arrested by the local authorities which intended to send him back to Iran. However, he has managed to escape, following a group of another 20 people who left Iran as well.

All of them, tried once more to enter the Turkish territory from another trail, where they were arrested by the Kurdish Army (PKK). They were detained and were asked to pay ransom in order to be released. After each one of them paid the amount of 200\$, the men of the Kurdish Army left them. Following a trip of ten days, on foot, by hitching and among many regions of Turkey, Gholam arrived at Istanbul where he was accompanied along with other refugees to the sea borders. All of them got onboard to a rib and after one day, they all arrived in Lesvos, Greece, during December 2005.

### HOSTILE CONDITIONS IN GREECE

Upon arriving at Lesvos, he was arrested by the Greek authorities and was beaten. He was detained in a cell for 2 weeks in miserable conditions. Then, obtaining a temporary document which permitted him to leave and go to Athens and apply for refugee status, he came to GCR premises in January 2006 where he was referred to the Greek authorities responsible for accepting or rejecting the application. His first one was rejected and the lawyers of GCR referred him again after the necessary legal actions to apply in the regional ayllum office in order to obtain the refugee status. His request was being examined for 8 years in the asylum committees! During these years he was employed as a delivery boy, as a leaflet distributor, he was asking for money at the traffic lights, he worked in a canteen, or as a waiter. He learned the Greek language in the streets of Athens and taking classes in the multicultural center Pyxis of GCR.

I learned  
the language in  
the streets  
of Athens.



# THE STORIES: GHOLAM

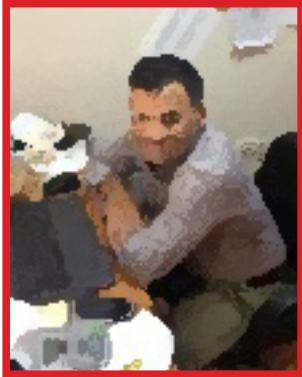
## TRYING TO INTEGRATE IN THE GREEK SOCIETY

After his level of Greek was satisfactory he went on to take classes in school (High School and Senior Highschool) and then he has managed to study mechatronics in a public vocational institution in Athens. During Highschool, he met the man who changed his life; his teacher, who took him in his home and started adoption procedures which never completed due to the fact that adopting someone is extremely time-consuming. From 2010 he stays with the father of his teacher, who considers him as his son. He states that the attitude towards him on behalf of the Greek society was very friendly and Greeks helped him to integrate into the society. He met his Greek girlfriend and plans to marry her after he completes his military obligations. In 2012, he was recognized as a political refugee and applied to become a Greek citizen. Due to the fact he was studying in a public institution his application was hastened and after 3 years he took the exams for the Greek citizenship, he passed them obtaining the citizenship and he is waiting to be called to fulfill his military obligation, provisioned in the law for all Greek citizens.

He has been working as a part-time interpreter in GCR from 2011 and as a full timer from January 2012. He speaks Farsi, English and Greek. Most of his friends are Greek and he considers himself as a fully integrated ex refugee, planning to create his own family in Greece. Every day, he helps his compatriots to obtain their documents and apply for asylum status. Furthermore, he participates in charity organizations, facilitating his community and his fellows to be actively engaged in integration policies and strategies.

**In high school, I met the man who changed my life.**

# THE STORIES: NASRUDDIN



First name: **NASRUDDIN**

Last name: **NIZAMI**

Age: **31**

Country of origin: **AFGHANISTAN**

Living in **Greece** since: **2007**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Nasruddin is a foreign language professional working in GCR as an interpreter. The members of his family live around Europe. He left Afghanistan trying to avoid political persecution and he has applied to obtain the refugee status both in the UK and Austria, where his applications were rejected. He returned to Greece and after a series of adventures he has managed to fully integrate into Greek society.

## “DIFFICULTIES MAKE US STRONGER”

### NASRUDDIN'S STORY

He left Afghanistan for political reasons; he was threatened by the Afghani government and terrorist groups because his father and his brother belonged to the opposition political party. At the age of 21, (October 2007) he decided to leave Afghanistan illegally, through Iran and Turkey. He arrived at Samos with the intention to go to the UK, where his cousin resides. He left Greece in December 2007 and arrived in the UK, where he applied for asylum.

The authorities found out that he came from Greece, so based in Dublin relocation scheme their decision was to send him back to Greece (country of first reception). After 8 months of staying in London, during August 2008 he returned to Greece.

He stayed in Athens for 8 more months and then he left once more for Austria, this time, in June 2009. He applied for asylum, his application was rejected again and in December 2009 he returned to Athens. He then stays in Greece for 7 years. In the beginning, he encountered many problems with the language, with his accommodation (he was staying with other 7 people in one apartment) and unemployment. Neither the State nor the civil society organizations provided any help to him. Without knowing the Greek language, he was looking for a job with the support of a Pakistani fellow already residing in Greece for 30 years, who was reading the advertisements of the job sector of the Greek press.

### DIFFICULTIES IN JOBS

He finally managed to find a job in a hotel in Zakynthos (an Ionian island) -in March 2010- as the janitor's assistant, in order to learn some skills and the language. He worked two summer seasons in this hotel, he learned Greek quickly, but he still had difficulties with the language as well as with the working hours (he was working 14 hours a day with a very low salary), the racist mentality (he was told that he was taking the job of the Greeks). Furthermore, he was working illegally and without any social insurance and security. Every time the local authorities were conducting controls of the situation in the hotel, they were hiding him in a closet in the basement of the hotel. The second season (2011) he worked

**It took me many tries to get to and stay in Greece.**

# THE STORIES: NASRUDDIN

legally, however, although his contract was part-time, he was obliged to work more than 10 hours a day.

## BACK TO ATHENS

In 2012, he returned to Athens, wishing to change his living conditions. He was tired, he had no friends and was exhausted by the work. He had earned some money in case he stayed unemployed and started taking Greek language classes in GCR (until then, he did not know to speak or write). Still, he was facing racist attacks because, as he noted “everyone judges you by the colour of your skin”. But difficulties and obstacles make you stronger” and thanks to the Afghan community and the many languages he was speaking (Farsi, Pashto, Dari, English and Greek) he found a job in IOM as an interpreter and then as case manager in the reintegration service of the organization for Pakistanis, Afghanis and Bangladeshis. He worked there for 1 year, until November 2013 because his contract was not renewed. In the meantime, his asylum application was rejected without any interview and all he had was his pink card (which only shows that his application has been submitted) valid for 3 months.

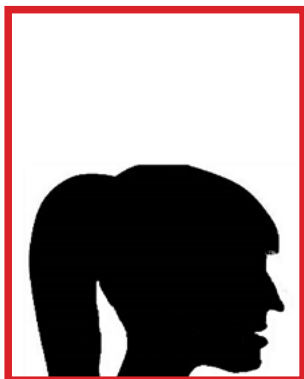
## TOWARDS SOCIAL INCLUSION

During his stay in Athens, he has worked as a volunteer in different refugee communities and in December 2013 he applied for a job in GCR, where he still works as an interpreter. In 2015, he passed the exams for the basic knowledge of the Greek language and received the A2 Certification. Finally, in March 2016, he obtained the refugee status and since 2015 has also worked on a voluntarily basis in the “Solomon” multicultural magazine, which is published

by refugees and immigrants from a vast range of countries and has as its scope to show to the societies of Europe that refugees and immigrants are an integral part of them. However, he notes, “sometimes society do not accept ‘aliens’ with a pleasant way. Battling for the rights of the minorities is a means to wake the world and the European societies up. However, mass media do not show the issues they affront and present only the negative aspects and images of the current refugee crisis”.

**Mass media  
only present the  
negative aspects  
of refugees.**

# THE STORIES: NILAB



First name: **NILAB**

Last name: **DOST**

Age: **37**

Country of origin: **AFGHANISTAN**

Living in **Germany** since: **1981**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Nilab left her home country Afghanistan when she was a small child of less than 2 years, together with her parents and her older sister. She came to Germany, lived in a small city in the North and went to school. Her parents struggled to make Germany the new home for the family, while their children went to kindergarten and to school. Even though her story of fleeing the country is 35 years old there are still traces of feeling “different”. She comes from a very liberal family and that was something that made an imprint on her.

## “THE LANGUAGE STILL SOUNDS LIKE HOME.”

### LEAVING AFGHANISTAN AND ARRIVING IN GERMANY

Nilab’s father was a communist and when the Taliban came into power he was a wanted person. The family had to go into hiding and it was clear that the family had to leave the country. The family had a very good living in Afghanistan, but they were in grave danger.

The aim was to go to Europe since the extended family had many contacts to Britain, France, Germany and even some relatives living in other European countries. Her mother wanted to go to Spain, but the chances of getting a residence permit were the highest in Germany.

**You have to go your way and don’t let yourself be misled.**

When in Germany, they first came to Frankfurt and then were brought to a small village in the North and from that to a small city in the vicinity. They were the first refugees there and the very first Muslims. Her sister and she were placed into a kindergarten, but her sister refused to speak. There was a nice woman who made a special effort to help the family with all the challenges they faced during the first months in Germany. Two couples were especially helpful and they remain good friends of the family up to now. Nilab’s mother found a job very quickly because she was a nurse, her father had more problems. He learned German in the library, there were even German courses. He got a job, but compared to his position in Afghanistan (where he was a manager) it was not on his level of competence. Still, he worked his way up. Meanwhile, Nilab and her sister were in school and they were still “outside”. They did not know the rules (e.g. getting presents for Christmas) and even though her parents tried to assimilate into the German society in order to make it easier for their children, they were still “the migrants”. During festivities, like birthday parties or Christmas celebrations, all the migrants sat at one table, because the teacher thought this the best. They had nothing in common, but still this was the way it was done.

# THE STORIES: NILAB

## BELONGING?

### IT WAS DIFFICULT AND IT WAS NOT MADE EASY FOR THEM

Even though Nilab never returned Afghanistan (she wanted to, but it has not come true as yet) she speaks the language. And she talks Dari with her relatives. Not many of them stayed in Afghanistan, they are all over Europe. But listening to her mother tongue still sounds like “home”.

When Nilab was 10 years old, her parents and her sister and she got the residence permit and that was the moment when the parents decided to stay in Germany. The transition was, in one way, easier than thought, because back in the 1970s, Afghanistan had a very liberal society and was open to international contacts and relations.

Being in Germany, the family each had a different speed of integration and there was no consciousness about the difficulties of integration processes, compared to today or compared to Great Britain, where the society learned to live with a multi-cultural approach earlier on.

I am  
a citizen of the  
world and  
I do not need to  
justify where  
I live.

## BEING A MIGRANT WORKER, STILL

When Nilab was 20 years old, she moved to Hamburg and of course life was different here. She had (and still has) many friends with a different cultural background and she feels like a citizen of the world. But on the job, she had to defend herself more than once. “Are you able to make printouts? We need that!” or “you really speak a very good German” are only the more polite answers during job interviews. She always felt like she has to explain that

she is able to work in Germany ALTHOUGH she is from Afghanistan. Her strategy is to go her way, look very closely and try not to legitimate herself, because she does not have to. That is what she tries to give to others. And not only to migrants.

# THE STORIES: YASSIR



First name: **YASSIR**

Last name: **MOTRAJI**

Age: **43**

Country of origin: **SYRIA**

Living in **Germany** since: **2012**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Yassir Motraji was a professor of Linguistics and Arabic Language at the university in Syria, married to a wife with German origins, two children. 5 years ago, he and his family had to leave his country because the German Embassy told them repeatedly that they are no longer safe and they should leave immediately. He came to Germany, for years he did little else but study German. He is often asked to tell about his story at events with refugees, volunteers and politicians.

Now he is a language teacher in Adult Education, works as an expert in matters concerning the Arabic language for schools and for universities. His dream is: to be a professor again, this time in Germany.

## “... AND I LOOKED AT THE HEATING.”

### YASSIRS STORY CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

Even before the world knew about the Syrian war, the threat to citizens with

foreign origins was already there. Yassirs wife has German origins, and that was dangerous. The German Embassy in Damascus sent them several emails and urged them to leave the country, as soon as possible. Especially his home town was under threat to be occupied by ISIS, and then it would have been impossible to escape and their lives would have been in danger. So they left.

### STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

Yassir and his family had the big advantage that because of his wife's roots they got a Schengen visa for the whole family and they came to Hamburg, because of relatives living in Hamburg already. But the German police for foreigners demanded to be shown the mails they received from the German Embassy. They wanted to know whether he and his family really were in danger. When Yassir arrived, his family was one of the first refugees from Syria.

The family arrived in Hamburg and they could live with Yassirs sister-in-law, in a flat of 40 square meters. They were supported financially by the German government, but nobody wanted to rent an apartment to them. Yassir started to learn German immediately and he tried for a job.

In the first week, he sent out 25 job applications, and from that time on, he sent out 15 applications per week. He applied for jobs as a translator or as a teacher.

His progress of learning German was amazing: within the first year he advanced to B1, and not much later he got his certificate of C 1, How did he do that? He told himself that he had to learn the language in order to belong, and fast. That was, in his opinion, his job. And he went at it with vigor: each day he learned 100 new words. In the supermarket, in the park, wherever he went, he wrote German words and their Arabic translations on papers and he never went anywhere without these papers.

**His motto:**  
**Learning is my job,**  
**that is what**  
**I get paid for.**



# THE STORIES: YASSIR

His children got annoyed with him, even his wife, but he insisted on learning. But his situation was difficult: the small flat, 5 people... so he sat in a coffee shop everyday and learned there. But he did not have the money for many coffees, so he nursed one cup for hours.

After 6 months the family found a small flat for themselves, but it was moldy. His daughters were not happy in Germany and wanted to go back to Syria, they felt left out in school because there were almost no Arabs in their school. But whenever Yassir thought about the situation and his troubles, he looked at the heating in the rooms they had. And he thought of other refugees in camps and tents, freezing. He felt that he was lucky to have escaped and was adamant that he would make the best of what he got.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

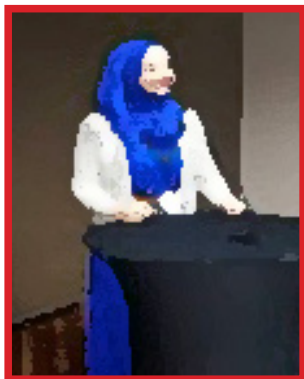
Sitting in the coffee shop, learning German with all his flying papers for hours, Yassir was approached by a German couple, older than him. They wanted to know what he was doing all the time. He told them, and they offered to talk with him so he could learn German faster. And that is what they did. They helped Yassir's family in many other ways and the two families are still best friends, celebrating the holidays like Christmas and Bayram together. That was, in a way, the first experience of "belonging". After two years, he found his first job as a teacher for adults, teaching his language. All the time before he got his first job, he felt so low because he could not earn his own money and others had to serve him in the coffee shop. But he still had problems to understand the German society and their customs: why do they wait at the red line in the bank office?

**The German society has to show the refugees how to integrate.**

What does it mean? Nobody told him, he made a lot of mistakes. He demands that the German society should make an effort to show the rules and customs to the newcomers, and for them to obey these rules. And: this process of integration should start early on. Nowadays, Yassir is working in different jobs and pursues his dream of becoming a professor once again. He supports his brother who came with his family one year ago but does not receive any money from the German government. But he always makes time to appear at events or other occasions to talk about his story and how he found his way into the German society. He supports others on their way towards integration. He even has been asked by the Mayor of Hamburg to appear at a function of the City of Hamburg, regarding refugee work. In his mind, those activities are very important even though it means earning less money. But he always tells others that they can do what he did: give his first lecture in German at a university he applied at after only two years in Germany.

**Helping and inspiring others is important to him.**

# THE STORIES: SONDUS



First name: **SONDUS**

Last name: **AL-KADRI**

Age: **29**

Country of origin: **SYRIA (DAMASCUS)**

Living in **Portugal** since: **2015**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Sondus, a 29-year-old Syrian woman, has remarkable strength, autonomy and determination. She escapes from Syria and arrives in Portugal by chance. Takes advantage of the opportunities that arise in the best way possible, to study and be an excellent, competent and specialized dentist. Despite the war, setbacks and losses, she maintains the focus of her life and strives for it: to be a competent professional and live in peace with her daughter.

**“I’M GOING TO GIVE MY DAUGHTER THREE THINGS: PEACE, LOVE AND DIGNITY”**

## LIFE IN SYRIA

Sondus was born in Damascus, although she lived most of her childhood and youth in Saudi Arabia, Ryad. Her father had an invitation to work in Ryad and the family moved to Saudi Arabia. She remembers spending holidays in Damascus, for 3 months, to be with her family: uncles, aunts, grandparents,

cousins. When she finished school, she returned to Syria to attend a university accompanied by her sister. In 2005 she moved to Daraa, where she started studying dental medicine.

## THE CONFLICT

In March of 2011 the civil war began and one of the first cities to enter the conflict was precisely Daraa. Early on the city was surrounded, which made access to the university very difficult for people who were in the centre of Daraa. There were also no contacts with the outside world. The trips to the universities were often interrupted by military barriers and movements of troops and equipment. *“It was the first time I saw these things, it was a great shock! As our university was close to Daraa, I began to see and hear the war.”* The family told her to return immediately to Saudi Arabia because the sisters were alone in Daraa, but Sondus said she will only leave Syria when she gets her certificate. Within the university there was great tension between those in favour and those who were against President Bashar Al-Assad. The tension was so great that the Director of the university sent all the students home and closed the classes. There was a constant fear inside the university. With the conflict worsening at the doors of her home, she decided to return to Saudi Arabia. During the time she was in Daraa, Sondus marries and has a daughter. But the marriage does not work and Sondus divorced. The daughter moves to live with her husband’s family in Damascus, and since she doesn’t have a visa to go, Sondus leaves for Saudi Arabia alone.

**Make your  
decisions without  
fear to reach your  
objectives**

# THE STORIES: SONDUS

## BETWEEN SYRIA, SAUDI ARABIA AND TURKEY

In 2013, she returned to Syria to meet again and live with her daughter. The girl's father, a medical surgeon, had left the country, leaving the girl with her paternal grandmother. Sondus went to live in Damascus. Four months later she gets engaged, a new boyfriend and a new perspective on life. But a month and a week later the fiancé dies in an attack. *"This was more than hard for me, I have no words to describe."* Finally in May 2013, she got the visa for her daughter and returned to Saudi Arabia. She returned to live with her mother, father and brothers. Although now in a safe place, she would like to return to Syria someday. She really wanted to be able to help her country. Back in Saudi Arabia, she cannot continue her studies, so she moves to Istanbul, Turkey, to study at the Arab International School in Istanbul, Al-Kharsa Orthodontic Clinic, where she graduated in Dental Medicine. However, she realized that staying in Turkey would not be the best place where to continue her studies. The idea of returning to Syria was now completely set aside.

## ARRIVAL AND LIFE IN PORTUGAL

In Istanbul she heard about the online platform created by former President of the Portuguese Republic Dr Jorge Sampaio that made possible for "refugees" to come to Portugal to study. She gathered all the necessary documentation and applied. *"I did not know anything about Portugal, Lisbon, nor did I know the language."* She arrived in Lisbon on October 2, 2015. *"As soon as I arrived I asked to take Portuguese classes. I was told that I was going to live with a Portuguese lady who only spoke French and Portuguese and I only spoke*

**I need  
to make friends  
here, or I cannot  
survive.**

*Arabic and English. I panicked. How could I communicate with this person?": At first she was greeted by the daughter of this lady who spoke English but who was not at home all the time. So she felt the real need to learn the language. She thought this was the first step towards inclusion. She studied Portuguese at the CIAL, a language center in Lisbon, and practiced with the Portuguese family with whom she lived. "I tell all the refugees I know. The first thing to do is to learn Portuguese. Everyone says it's difficult but I say - You have to learn! If you want, you can do it!"*

## NEW BELONGINGS AND INCLUSION

### LISBON

*"I wear a headscarf, I always have my head covered, and when I'm out on the street, some people look at me strangely. I always respond with a smile. A smile always disarms. Smiling is a language of the world!"* In Lisbon she felt at peace and safe. *"The people are very nice, they look at me more out of curiosity."* Thus began a master's degree in dentistry at the Faculty of Dental Medicine of Lisbon. In the university environment was very well received. She talks a lot in her colleagues' curiosity but not in any kind of rejection. *"They asked me very curious things: Do you have cars? Do you live in homes? Do you see television? I had to laugh at the questions... but I try always to answer all questions".* She thinks that in this way she helps to demystify the day-to-day life in the Arab world. In her master's degree a group of eight students called "girls of orthodontics" was created. Although informal they have regular gatherings. We do not have much time, we have to study a lot. . .

*"I always tried to integrate myself, here in Portugal. I always try to talk to the*

# THE STORIES: SONDUS

*people in my neighbourhood and in my circle of friends". She finishes her first master's degree in Lisbon. She thinks she has to go on. "I thought! And now? What do I do? I need to study more! Back to Syria I cannot anymore". She found out that she can apply for a new scholarship, but now in Porto. When she left Lisbon for Porto, the lady who hosted her did not want to take back the key of the house. She did not let Sondus take all her clothes, either. "This is your home in Portugal. You keep the key and you leave your clothes here so you can always come back", said the lady. Last Christmas all the (Portuguese) family gathered money to buy a ticket for Sondus to go to a Conference in the United States. "My family, my Arab friends are far away. If I do not integrate with the Portuguese, if I do not make friends here, I will not have the strength to live."*

## PORTO

She joins a more specialized Masters at *Cooperativa de Ensino Superior Politécnico e Universitário* in her area, Orthodontics, more specific in surgery. And she continues her studies. A new opportunity to increase her knowledge. Today in Porto she lives in a rented room, she participates regularly in her peer group activities and has a normal life within her host family. She says that she studies a lot, but tries to live a life as a Porto "citizen", even thinking that she is already well integrated. She has daily contacts with her daughter over the internet. She cannot go to visit her in Ryad, nor can her daughter come to Portugal (the visa is only for her), but the great dream is to be able to quickly build a life together.

## THE FUTURE

*"I am building my future and the future of my daughter. I am a single mother, I have to improve in my profession, I will do anything to make my daughter happy, with peace, and with a normal life. I just want peace. I do not want more than this, this is what I want in the future. I'm going to give my daughter three things: peace, love and dignity. "*

# THE STORIES: MOHAMMAD



First name: **MOHAMMAD**

Last name: **SAFEEA**

Age: **29**

Country of origin: **SYRIA** (Palestinian origin)

Living in **Portugal** since: **2014**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Mohammad Safeea, syrian of palestinian origin, mechanical engineer, 29 years old, escapes not to be incorporated into the army of Bashar-al-Assad and arrives in Portugal in 2014, after a visit to Algeria, where he failed to fulfill his dream of continuing to study. Completes the master's degree with a perfect score, studies Portuguese and starts the PhD in collaborative robotics. He likes cod, fado and freedom. He is creating his own future and wants to be happy in Portugal.

**“STUDY, WORK, RAISE A FAMILY, BE HAPPY AND LIVE IN PEACE”**

## CONFLICT

The war began and the first bombings took place in Damascus when Mohammad had just completed his mechanical engineering course. He was called to the army loyal to President Bashar al-Assad. As he did not agree with

<sup>1</sup> <http://jorgesampaio.pt/jorgesampaio/pt/>

Bashar al-Assad's policies and did not want to go to war, he decided to leave the country. Mohammad does not want to talk much about the conflict. He then interrupted his studies and said that his mother was very sad.

## ESCAPE AND ARRIVAL IN PORTUGAL

Mohammad escaped from Damascus following his call to the army and went to Algeria. He went to meet an uncle who lived in Algiers.

He had some difficulties in going to Algeria, but as he escaped early in the war, visas were still relatively easy to obtain. He stayed there for two years, initially maintaining his intention to continue his studies, with a master's degree in his area. He got some work to do, but he said it was difficult to work. The jobs were all manual and low-paid.

He also had problems with the papers and regularization of his situation in the country. The idea of continuing his studies did not materialize. *“I could not continue studying”*, he said.

## NEW BELONGINGS AND INCLUSION

Following on-line research, he applied for and obtained a scholarship through the platform created by former President of the Portuguese Republic Jorge Sampaio<sup>1</sup>. There was a new possibility of going to Portugal.

In the first attempt to reach Portugal by plane and despite having all the necessary documentation (according to his perspective), he was prevented from leaving for Europe at Algiers Airport. With the legal support of the platform, it was possible, through the embassies of Portugal and Palestine, to overcome the situation. He makes a special reference to Dr. Helena, platform technician - *“Without her I would*

**You need to have frequent contact with the cultural and social life of the host society.**



# THE STORIES: MOHAMMAD

*not be here.* The whole process took a month. Finally he arrived by plane in Lisbon.

He stayed one day in Lisbon and then went to Coimbra on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014 to start his studies. The masters course had already begun. The lectures in the master was all in English, which facilitated the accompaniment of the academic work.

At the same time, he started a Portuguese course at the University, at the Faculty of Arts. He says that although English is the dominant language in the scientific community, where he is included, he felt a great need to learn the local language.

## LIFE IN COIMBRA

With the learning of Portuguese, the integration process was strengthened. He began to participate in fado gatherings, go to music concerts and see plays. It also refers to the support given by a teacher of the faculty of letters, who often invited him to go to cultural meetings. He said that he felt few integration difficulties and had enough support from people and institutions. He lives in a student house, which is shared with Portuguese but also with Erasmus students from other countries. Made lots of friends around here, mainly companions in academic life.

## PUBLIC FIGURE

He completed with a maximum grade (20 points) the master's degree in Mechanical Engineering, at the University of Coimbra, in 2016. He currently is doing his PhD and is already a "fundamental" piece in the robotics laboratory of the University of Coimbra.

Mohammad started to have a great public exposure through various

Portuguese media<sup>2</sup>. Asked about the relevance of his example to breaking some prejudices towards refugees, he says:

*"I'm not that famous (laughs), but maybe my example is important."*

Example of a dedicated and competent student. One day he gave an interview to a television station and the other day, when he woke up, he had many messages on his cell phone asking for more interviews.

He is recognised in the street, in the supermarket, in the gym he attends. He says people did not know, or even imagine, that he was a refugee, much less a student. "Yes, perhaps, this may help to break people's prejudice toward refugees."

He says that people who live in Syria and elsewhere want the same thing as everyone else: *"Study, work, raise a family, be happy and live in peace."*

*"People think that in Syria we live in the middle ages, that no one studies, that we have seven women! When I go out at night and they ask me where I am from and I say that I am from Syria, they get a little scared. "I, with my work, can change this idea a little. I can be an example of good integration."*

## EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

*"I want to stay and live here",* in answering the question about his expectations for the future, even though his family remains in Damascus. *"I want to finish my studies, work, raise a family"*. He thinks having great prospects of work. He also says that life is beautiful here. He refers to food (especially cod). *"I like freedom, which I was not used to. I have a future here"*. He feels happy at the University of Coimbra. He has what he needs. *"I have a great professor doctoral advisor"*. *"I'm very lucky"*

I like  
freedom, which  
I was not  
used to.

<sup>2</sup> Ex: <https://www.publico.pt/2017/02/11/sociedade/noticia/mohammad-o-refugiado-sirio-que-brilha-na-robotica-em-coimbra-176169>



# THE STORIES: MOHAMMAD

## MOHAMMAD, THE SYRIAN REFUGEE SHINNING IN ROBOTICS

In the end, he talks about his doctoral thesis, which he carries out in the scope of the European project: *ColRobot: Collaborative Robotics for Assembly and Kitting in Smart Manufacturing*<sup>3</sup>. It is intended to avoid collisions between robots and humans, in context of a “smart factory”.

In the laboratory, equipped with sensors, he exemplifies, with several movements of approach of a robotic arm, that deviates from the movements of the researcher. “*Here, future is being created*”, he says. As affirmed by his advisor professor, Pedro Neto<sup>4</sup>, the young Syrian is today “*a very important member of the laboratory*”. “*There is a shortage of skilled researchers in this area, and he has, to a certain extent, suppressed this lack*”,

he emphasizes, considering that “it is not common” to find someone with the expertise of Mohammad, Syrian, Portuguese or from any other nationality...

We are  
people like the  
others, who happen  
to be refugees...

<sup>3</sup> <https://colrobot.eu/about-colrobot>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.publico.pt/2017/02/11/sociedade/noticia/mohammad-o-refugiado-sirio-que-brilha-na-robotica-em-coimbra-176169>

# THE STORIES: ASHKAN



First name: **ASHKAN**

Last name: **SELFİ**

Age: **45**

Country of origin: **IRAN**

Living in **Portugal** since: **1988**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Ashkan escaped from Teheran at the age of 14 by his father decision and to reunite to the brother who lives in Portugal. With strong family support, great persistence, hard work, and honesty, he overcame the very hard first years and faced the language, socialisation and integration difficulties he experienced. Formed his own family and today manages a large food distribution company in Portugal. He actively supports the new refugees in their journey of adaptation and inclusion into Portuguese society.

## “MY SON ASHKAN WILL GO TO THE WEDDING!”

### THE CONFLICT

Following the Revolution (1979) and the Iran-Iraq War (1980), there was a large exodus of people from Iran to escape violence and lack of freedom. Most people wanted to go to the United States. As a second option, came the countries of northern Europe, mainly Germany. Some families, with relatives

abroad, tried to get their children to go to those countries, to escape the 2-3 years military service and the religious militias that were on the streets encouraging young people to go to the war front and fight.

### THE ESCAPE OF THE SELFİ BOYS

*“My brother was 18 at that time. My father sent my older brother away to escape the war. He paid a trafficker for that purpose. My brother ran away on a donkey, a camel and on foot. He crossed the border of Pakistan, - a very tense period, because there was no communication. Through another trafficker he got a passport. He was trying to go to the USA, where our uncle lived. He was arrested at Frankfurt airport and threatened with deportation. He explained that he was considered a deserter by the government of Iran. If he went back there, he would be executed. He asked for asylum once he would be killed in Iran. He was informed that he could not stay in Germany, but that he could go to Portugal. When he told his family that he was in Portugal, the family ran to buy an atlas, because nobody knew where this strange country was!...”*

### ASHKAN'S ESCAPE

Meantime revolution and war worsened, as well as the living conditions.

*“Our house in Tehran was close to the state TV station and the bombings were constant.”*

In addition to the bombings, the Ashkan family suffered persecution from the militias (religious police). They always felt in danger. Family members were not very religious and people knew about it.

At school, children were visited by martyrs who had lost their arms and legs in the war and also by those who were going to kill themselves in the name

**I got very strong family support.**

# THE STORIES: ASHKAN

of religion. It was an atmosphere of terror.

One day, Ashkan's father went to the market to buy two Persian rugs. With Ashkan (14 years old) by the hand, he went to the Consulate of Portugal and said: *"My oldest son, who now lives in Portugal, is going to be married. I would like someone to represent the family at the wedding. My son Ashkan will go to the wedding!"* At the Consulate Ashkan was granted a visa for one week.

## ARRIVAL AND LIFE IN PORTUGAL

Ashkan arrived in Portugal in 1988. When he left the airport, he saw for the first time in his life a rainbow! But this initial idea of beauty changed quickly, when he saw the poor houses around the "2nd circular"...

The first years were very hard. He missed his family very much.

*"I received every week a letter from my father. Every Wednesday I received a letter and cried compulsively"*

One day the letters stopped coming. He wrote to his father and received a letter from his mother telling him that his father had disappeared.

*"My father had been arrested for sending his sons out of the country. He was imprisoned, incommunicable for 2 years. No one knew his whereabouts. After this period, he was forced to go to war, but since he was already 60, he stayed there less than a year"*

Meantime, Ashkan already attended the Secondary School of Paço D' Arcos, and in parallel he learned and perfected Portuguese. But he had great difficulty making friends. He was known at school as "the Arab". *"They thought I was a terrorist or something similar"*

## NEW BELONGINGS AND INCLUSION

Until one day he decided to join the student association of the school. His situation at school started to change. He made friends and participated actively in school activities.

*"I made friends I have until today. Really deep friendship. We're friends still today. One of them is even my son godfather. I was welcomed by their families. They invited me for Christmas. They also took care of me, as I was young I wanted to do this and that and they... Wait, take it easy... do not get involved in this... They were true friends..."*

Life continued to change. At the age of 18 he got a job at a pizzeria in Cascais. He studied and worked. He started to make money and as his brother got married, he decided to move away and live alone.

One day, his brother invited him to work with him. His brother wanted to start a company to supply a restaurant in Cascais. He resigned from the pizzeria and started working with his brother. He got up every day at 3:00 am to fetch potatoes, tomatoes, onions at the Ribeira Market, in Lisbon, and carry back the goods by train to Cascais. They made some money, which allowed them to buy a small van and expand the business. They went on to supply three more restaurants.

Gradually, they are recognized by the Cascais restaurants as good workers, honest and fulfilling deadlines. *"By 3:00 am we were already on our way to the market. That was the only way to ensure that we could get the best products. We were always the first to arrive"* The fame was growing and the company too.

**You have to take risks and show entrepreneurial capacity and determination.**

# THE STORIES: ASHKAN

## LIFE IN PORTUGAL

As the expansion of work, the social and community life of Ashkan has also been intensifying. Already established economically, Ashkan met his first wife. She, of Brazilian nationality, gave Ashkan a new perspective on life. Ashkan travelled to Brazil. There he met the family of his wife and created emotional bonds that are present until today in his life. *"It's still my family, my Brazilian family"*. He has a son, now 14 years old. He projected in his son all the hope for a new world. After a while, however, the marriage came to an end and Ashkan divorced. Despite the separation, he maintains a good relationship with his ex-wife, having opted together to share custody of their son.

About two years ago, Ashkan met his second wife. She, senior food technician, started working at Ashkan's company. Ashkan was delighted with the lady. *"I was very impressed by her strength and of course her beauty"*. They started dating and after a year they got married.

Today, Ashkan owns a large food distribution company in Portugal. As a successful businessman, Ashkan has the financial means to support the refugees, especially those from Iran. As he felt this drama in his own skin, and now having the position he has, he feels obliged to help them.

He has refugees working with him, has helped others to establish direct contacts with support institutions and other initiatives.

During our interview we were interrupted a few times for Ashkan to answer his mobile to deal with refugee issues.

Only 10 years after his escape, Ashkan meets again his father, mother and sister.

**By 3:00 am,  
we were already  
on our way to  
the market.**

# THE STORIES: XERIP



First name: **XERIP**

Last name: **SIYABEND**

Age: **31**

Country of origin: **KURDISTAN**

**(Turkish citizenship)**

Living in **Italy** since: **November 2012**

## SHORT SUMMARY

*'In Turkey the army was operating in the Kurdish areas burning villages and killing Kurdish civilians. You cannot freely express your cultural and political identity, and there is no freedom to express your opinion publicly, nor the ability to defend human rights. And it is this state of affairs which forces me to leave the country, to avoid jail and serious persecution or death.'*

## “... I HAD TO ESCAPE BECAUSE I'M A PACIFICIST ”

### XERIP'S STORY: CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

Xerip Siyabend was born in Diyarbakir, Turkey. He has 2 sisters and 2 brothers, of which he is the oldest brother. Xerip has a degree in Fashion, and after college started working in the fashion industry for a year. While studying he worked in the film industry as an artistic director, film assistant, and as a photographer collaborating with national and international journalists. Both of his sisters have

studied at the Fine Arts Academy, his brothers are football players, his mother works at home and his father is a songwriter.

In 1980 during the state coup in Turkey, as with many Kurdish families, his father's family was forced to move to Istanbul to create a new life. In 1984 his parents were married and moved to Silvan. In 1986 he was born, and after his birth they moved back to Istanbul because of the Turkish government pressure, where he attended elementary school, middle school and high school.

During those years he suffered discrimination by the Turkish government and nationalists because he wanted to study in his mother tongue, the Kurdish language. He was mistreated when he was 12 years old and sent to prison for about a week. During his days in jail he was tortured, but always stood up against the Turkish government's crimes. After high school he and his parents returned back to Kurdistan, in Southeast Turkey. He was there for about three months and then had the opportunity to participate in the European Voluntary Service (EVS) in Eboli, Italy. After six months, at the end of the project he returned to Turkey and joined the faculty of economics at Kafkas University.

During the first year of University he became an activist to defend human rights and the official Kurdish language recognition at universities. He started organizing petitions at Universities, after the launch of his campaign he was expelled from the University. After three years, in 2009 with the new law, he had the opportunity to go back to college and join another faculty, graduating in 2011. Soon after, the Turkish army forced him to enrol in the military service. In Turkey the army was operating in the Kurdish areas, burning villages and killing Kurdish civilians. Being a pacifist, he had to escape.

**I overcome obstacles by asking help to my Italian friends and associations.**

# THE STORIES: XERIP

He declared himself a conscientious objector and for a year hid himself moving around the country, until November 2012 when he arrived in Italy by plane.

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

When he arrived in Italy he had various difficulties like other asylum seekers. He slept several days in front of the desk to ask for political asylum and also in the streets, until he found the 'Socio-cultural Kurdish Ararat centre' where he stayed until October 2013. At the centre he was able to share his culture and identity with other Kurds coming from other areas of Kurdistan. He shared with them not only his culture but also his pains, because all of those that arrived and those that are already in the centre had similar experiences and sorrows.

His first obstacle was the language. The other major obstacles being the burden of bureaucracy, racism, job search and cultural difference. He received help from other Kurds who had already created a life in Italy, human rights organizations and some of his Italian friends.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

When Xerip obtained humanitarian protection he had the opportunity to work in various reception centres as a cultural mediator, and still does volunteering in the socio-cultural Kurdistan Ararat centre. The goal of his volunteering is to help the Kurds coming to Italy to seek political asylum, to make the Kurdish culture known and the cause of the Kurdish people. He has the opportunity to collaborate

**I have known  
and accepted Italian  
culture but at the same  
time I have made mine  
known too.**

with so many associations working in the world of immigration and human rights. Thanks to his previous experience in photography and film he worked with a few journalists producing documentaries in Italy, Syria and Iraq to give voice to ISIS war victims neglected by the media, as well as photographic exhibitions on Kurdish reality.



# THE STORIES: VAHIDA



First name: **VAHIDA**

Last name: **H.**

Age: **48**

Country of origin: **BOSNIA now**

**Republika srpska**

Living in **Slovenia** since: **1993**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Vahida H. was 19 when the war in Bosnia broke out and she had to leave her native village near Bosanski Novi first to spend a year in Croatia at her brother's place where she wanted to recover from her traumatic experience and escape. In 1993 she came to Slovenia, spent one year in a refugee centre, started translating upon what she was invited to join refugee schools network. She then decided to enrol in a university undergraduate programme. Now, she holds a BA of English and English literature, and a scientific master degree in social pedagogy. She has been working on national and international level with outstanding experts and finally she herself became an international expert. She currently works for one of the Slovenian ministries.

**“IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO REBUILD A HOUSE, NOR IS IT DIFFICULT TO BUILD A NEW ROAD, THE REAL ISSUE IS HOW TO REBUILD LIFE”**

*Vahida H. at a conference in 2011*

## CONFLICT

In 1991 the war with age-old historic, religious, ethnic, economic and cultural roots broke out in Bosnia, though this former Yugoslav Republic was considered as the most Yugoslav of all with different ethnic groups peacefully living together. It was an immense tragedy for the region and its inhabitants, an immense social disruption and disruption of individual life histories. Today this region has a new name, *Republika srpska* and the majority of the population are Serbs. Muslims and Catholics left. Actually nobody knows what the population structure is today since the last census painting the exact picture of population and its well being was back in 1991!

## ESCAPE

So, we said that Vahida was 19 when the war broke out. From the villages located behind her village Muslims were chased. She remembers that in her family house 45 people found refuge. It was difficult to say who chased them from their homes. Their neighbours, their friends? Difficult to say since the attackers were wearing masks. People who stayed at Vahida's family house brought food with them, but they would not share it with others, on the contrary they would hide it away for difficult times. Vahida's family had grains and vegetables but in a month or so all was gone. 45 hungry people were just too much to feed. The house soon smelled bad of the food not consumed, stored and hidden away. This was one of Vahida's first impressions of the war. Vahida remembers travelling by train together with so many others. Surprisingly she was not afraid. At each railway station she would jump off the train, fetching water for those who were thirsty. She would give a haircut to those who needed it. “When you are endangered, threatened, your are not afraid”, she says “since you have already lost what was most dear to you.”

# THE STORIES: VAHIDA

She also remembers that she could not control her talking and her mother would frequently put her hand over her mouth to silence her. But then Vahida was young, and she was not afraid of anything. Much more experienced and reasonable, her mother was more cautious.

Slowly the train reached the Croatian boarder. The family got separated there and Vahida's mother remained in Bosnia in a safe place while Vahida travelled on into Croatia. For a year or so she lived at her brother's to recover her forces after traumas she experienced. There was war in Croatia too but not in Zagreb.

## VAHIDA'S STORY

From Zagreb, Vahida travelled on to Slovenia to land in Hrastnik, a small industrial town and in a local refugee centre. She precisely remembers when it was: on the 15th of July 1993

I am OK,  
you are OK!

She lived in a wooden cottage, sharing her room with ten room mates. That this kind of intimacy was not always easy, goes without saying. In those days she was thinking a lot about her future. Where is she going to live? What is she going to do for living? What. . . So many questions! She started working doing translations and she learned a lot about herself and other people, her own ability to relate. Being able to relate, is extremely important when in refugee condition.

Not only grown-ups and older people were displaced. There were many children, scattered over Vahida was asked to work a school for refugee children. "For God's sake, will I be able to do it? I haven't been to university, I do not have the knowledge and skills., A refugee should try hard o learn the language of the host country and should have a good command of English. But there were people who trusted her. "Education and knowledge cannot be taken from you,

no matter what the circumstances are", says Vahida. Education is of outmost importance. Vahida was 24 when she felt an urgent need to study.

Vahida enrolled at the University of Ljubljana to study English and English literature. Her double life began. She worked and she studied. Moreover, the organisation where she worked took good care of people working there. Each month there was some training organised for the employees and additionally they spent from one to two days discussing their working life under the supervision of an expert. There was also a psychologist who in those days had just got retired to devote all her time and energy to children traumatised by war. She had her own international network of professional colleagues from different European countries. She asked them, she invited them to offer help. Which they did. They kept coming from Switzerland, The Netherlands, Great Britain, Belgium. This circle of intimates and colleagues became somehow also Vahida's circle, people whom she could rely on for help when needed.

Refugee families who lived in wooden cottages were focused on waiting, killing time, waiting for the situation to change. Often they did not think about the schooling of their children.?They would not easily open up to anybody and their attitude would get reflected on their children. Going to school belongs to the times of peace. But does it really? The children did not like to go to school. If they came, they often came dressed in pyjamas, their eyelids glued by long hours of sleep. But Vahida and her colleague teachers would not make a drama out of it. They would accept it and slowly the children would come neatly dressed to classes. One of the basic learning methods is by imitating and this is what happened in Vahida's classes.

Moreover, psycho-social help was organised for children and though she was not a good dancer, Vahida was invited to teach children dancing , teach the children and herself at the same time. And she learned how to dance teaching

# THE STORIES: VAHIDA

them like she had done it so many times before. And then the children were invited to give a public performance. And they were happy to be applauded. Their parents would come, proud of their children. Proud and happy. As for Vahida's role "I helped the school and the school helped me".

Vahida was 24 years old when she enrolled in a university undergraduate studies. Not speaking Slovene and being five years older than other students she was again in a situation of exclusion. But she clearly felt that education in the long run would be inclusive. She was sure of that.

In 1994 Vahida was coordinating learning assistants to refugee children, working closely with the volunteering retired psychologist who was older than herself, much more experienced, much more knowledgeable. This was a happy circumstance since in her she found a mentor. "There is no greater happiness", say Chinese people, "than finding a teacher".

When she started working she went with her mentoress to her first international transcontinental conference in Edmond, Canada. Her mentioress moderated a workshop on volunteering. Trembling, Vahida could not figure out what her own talk would be about. But then Eureka! She started telling her own volunteering story. She felt the large audience slowly got quiet listening, and she thought it was because she was ni good. In the end, when she dared to give it a look, she got standing ovations for sincerity and congruency and knowledge, of course. One has to be congruent to be persuasive. Comforted by this experience, she returned to her studies more confident and less shy. A real transformation was operated.

In 2000 Vahida was granted Slovenian citizenship.

**Some refugees go further because of the drama they experienced.**

## BELONGING

Vahida belongs to at least two cultures, Bosnian and Slovenian. In Ljubljana she feels at home, when in Bosnia she "goes to her mother's place". She has critical distance to the two cultures based on self reflection and transformative forces of her personality. She says: "*We in Slovenia...*" What makes her belong is her readiness to learn and to work, which makes her evolve together with her social environment.

## MILESTONES AND STRATEGIES SUPPORTING VAHIDA'S TRANSFORMATIVE INCLUSION

Scrutinizing Vahida's life course, it becomes obvious that she has the kind of psychological profile that stimulates inclusion, that she is resilient having overcome traumas, her life position has become I am OK you are OK. It is important to whom a refugee is connected because this person is a bridge between a refugee and the host society.

Several times in her life course she thought about the future (she enrolled in university undergraduate and later postgraduate studies) Her master thesis was closely related to her work and was about motivation, older people and volunteering. She is still on friendly terms with her master degree thesis director for whom she was also an interesting and resourceful student. She has learned Slovenian by doing, studying, working not sitting in school benches. She has acquired lots of experience, reflected experience. She has mastered Slovenian language, she has practically no accent. She is fluent and she can write in several languages, her work is not limited to one country but Europe and the world. She is a good communicator. She is a good project manager, she is a team player, always connecting people, institutions, areas of work, target groups. She likes solving problems and problem learning.

# THE STORIES: REUBEN



First name: **REUBEN**

Last name: **HAMBAKACHERE**

Age: **38**

Country of origin: **ZIMBABWE**

Living in **Ireland** since: **2006**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Reuben was a business man living in Zimbabwe in 2005 when he was forced to leave for political reasons. He was married with a young family and his wife and children moved from South Africa to Ireland in 2005 ahead of Reuben to seek asylum. Reuben followed her to Ireland in 2006.

Reuben is a founding member of 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers Platform Ireland (RASPI) in 2010. This group created a data base connecting all 34 Direct Provision Centers in Ireland. It was initially supported by the Refugees Council of Ireland. In 2014 Reuben was invited by Irish government minister Frances Fitzgerald to represent Asylum seekers as part of a working group. Reuben also works as a consultant for 'Cultur' an organisation that uses a community work approach to its work with Asylum Seekers and Migrants addressing the root causes of inequality and injustice. Reuben is a great ambassador for Asylum seekers in Ireland – a great role model for us all.

**“... AT ONE POINT I WAS ACTUALLY THREATENED BY SECURITY AUTHORITIES.”**

## REUBEN'S STORY, CONFLICT, AND ESCAPE

Reuben ran his own business in Zimbabwe. He lost a lot of his stock in a raid by the authorities in 2004. At this time matters worsened in a business context due to new laws that made it impossible for business men like Reuben to access foreign currency and carry on his business. In Zimbabwe around 2004 Reuben was targeted by the authorities as he was part of a community representing small businesses and was politically active protesting about restrictive practices in a business context. These protests attracted a lot of attention on him from the police authorities. He was part of a political movement that challenged the existing ruling party of President Mugabe. Because of his political activism against the ruling party Reuben was threatened by the police authorities and was advised by friends and colleagues to leave Zimbabwe. Many people who opposed the regime disappeared around this time. For safety reasons Reuben moved to South Africa in 2005 - the first step on his way to Asylum in Ireland in 2006.

**I met the Irish Minister to discuss the issues.**

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY TO END 'DIRECT PROVISION'

Reuben joined the Refugee Council of Ireland (RCI) as a volunteer in 2010. He started a campaign called 'end direct provision in Ireland'. While the Refugee Council of Ireland supported Reuben's campaign they were not supportive of some of his actions. This development stalled the RASPI initiative as he was

# THE STORIES: REUBEN

restrained by a lack of funding and RCI protocols. Reubens somewhat radical approach to end direct provision and proposed actions were not in line with RCI's and RCI was nervous about how their own funding could be affected. Reuben continued to work with the RCI for the next 3 to 4 years.

In 2014 Reuben received his Irish citizenship status and was invited by the Irish government to join a working group to address or improve 'Direct Provision' for asylum seekers in Ireland. Irish government minister Frances Fitzgerald's initiative sought to improve 'direct provision' for asylum seekers in Ireland. However, this was not what Reuben wanted. His struggle was to end Direct Provision in Ireland and he was a lone voice at the government table except for one other person Sue Conlon from the Refugees Council of Ireland that sought a radical change in how asylum seekers are treated. Both Reuben and Sue could not envisage any scenario to improve the situation as conditions and restrictive practices in respect of financial supports, barriers to education and general integration in society and the workforce were firmly in place. Reuben was looking for an alternative to direct provision and realised very soon that this was not going to happen. Reuben states that while there was a meeting of people in the working group "government decisions were already made" nothing could be achieved by remaining or propping up this group. He joined in August 2014 and resigned from the group in February 2015. He resigned for two reasons, 1) there was no chance of access to education and 2) no access to the workforce. He continued his struggle by going public with his resignation with an open letter to Minister Fitzgerald and the Chairman of the working group. Reuben returned to the core RASPI group (12 key members representing direct provision centres across Ireland) he was representing on the

**I started a campaign to end Direct Provision. It is racist.**

government working group to inform them of his decision. His decision to resign from the working group met with a mixed reaction where some members of the core group thought it better to remain at the table to have more influence on direct provision matters. Reuben argued that the working group was just a "cosmetic" exercise and "nothing tangible was going to come out of it"... this caused a major split in the original core group of activists Reuben was representing. Reuben was replaced by another member of the core RASPI group on the government panel.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Reuben began working for 'Cultur' as a volunteer in 2014 but after his resignation from the government working group he became more active in 2015. Reuben negotiated a contract to work part-time for Cultur. In his contract he has stipulated that he is free to operate as an activist to end direct provision as long as it does not conflict with Cultur's mission and objectives. He is a free agent and feels this is his best chance to give something back to society, that he has as a democratic right to freedom of speech which he will use to change or look for an alternative to direct provision. Significantly Reubens points out that he is representing Reuben (the individual) and the views of some core activists in his response to questions during this interview and is not representing Cultur. The interview recording ended and we continued a general discussion about his family, his dreams and hopes for the future. Reuben is a true activist and great role model for all asylum seekers looking to integrate in their new found societies.



# THE STORIES: ELVISA



First name: **ELVISA**

Last name: **KANTAREVIC**

Age: **35**

Country of origin: **BOSNIA**

Living in **Germany** since: **1992/2000**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Elvisa Kantarevic was born in Bosnia, she has one sister and one brother. The family lived in Bosnia, and when the atrocities with Serbia came about in 1991, they had to flee the country immediately. They came to Germany and she lived in Germany for 5 years, and she felt like a German. But then they were threatened to be deported to Bosnia again, and that happened in 1997. But she was convinced that she would come back to Germany. In 2000 she got a student visa and started her time at the university, together with her sister. Since 2005 Elvisa is married, has 2 children, lives in Hamburg and is Head of the Department of Migration and Diversity in a well-known Education Agency.

## "I WAS A GERMAN WITH A SELL-BY-DATE."

### SUDDEN LEAVE

Elvisa was 10 years when the conflict between Bosnia and Serbia began. She did not really know what was going on, only that the adults always had some

secrets. One day, the mother of her best friend told her that she can't play with her daughter anymore, because she is Bosnian. The same day, she heard the first bombs. For weeks they bought food in a panic, otherwise stayed at home and slept in their clothes. Then one day, Elvisa and her sister were put into a car with her mother and they left Bosnia. The children did not know where they were headed to. Since her father already worked in Germany as a miner, they drove to Germany.

### FINDING HER PLACE IN THE NEW SOCIETY

Her father lived in Gladbeck, a small town in the mining area of Germany. He looked for a flat for the family, but all he found was a garage. They lived under these conditions for 6 months, but Elvisa was happy because she felt secure and there were many people in the neighborhood helping them with food, sweets and learning German.

Elvisa started school in 5. Grade at a special school, but very soon she could change to a "Gymnasium" because she learned the language and everything else very quickly. She found friends and excelled in school, as did her sister, who was one year behind her. She was adamant to learn the language as fast as possible. She had a key experience, when her sister was in hospital and could not tell what her troubles are. That was when she and her sister decided that they need to learn the language fast. They got a dictionary from her father and learned and learned. Very soon they had to translate all the official papers or accompany the family members to the doctor in order to do the translation. But they did not mind.

But all the time they only had a permit to stay in Germany on the basis of tolerance, securing their presence for no more than 6 months each. Elvisa felt like a German child, but only with a sell-by-date.



# THE STORIES: ELVISA

And then came the horror: they got the order of deportation, when she was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. But there was one woman in the neighborhood who did not accept that decision. She raised publicity and others joined her in the effort to change this decision. And they succeeded, but only partly. Elvisa and her sister could stay, for one year, until they had finished school – but only with one parent. So her mother and her younger brother left Germany and the sisters and the father stayed in Germany. For one more year.

## COMING BACK AND BELONGING, FINALLY

They went back to Bosnia, went to school for three more years and then her sister and she applied for a university visa and were very lucky to get one, both. They studied “German language und philosophy” at Bochum and finished in 2005 with a Bachelor degree.

All her vocational life Elvisa has tried to help those who have been in the same situation as she was: being a stranger in a country. She has been a counsellor for migrant youth, and then she changed into her place now, which is the Agency for Migration and Diversity. She is heading this agency now.

She is organizing events, works in projects and is networking in order to make the situation for migrants in the labor market a better one. At the same time she helps others who struggle and is still supporting her family back in Bosnia financially. The newest effort is a project to train mentors to help refugees who start a job in Germany.

In 2005 she married and has two children. She feels that she belongs now to Germany and the German society, finally. In 2008 she got the German

citizenship. Bosnia is still “home”, because of family and friends. But Germany is home, too. And she is proud to be a German.

**You have to  
have the willpower  
of being part of your  
surroundings**

# THE STORIES: TINU



First name: **TINU**

Last name: **ACHIOYA**

Age: **43**

Country of origin: **NIGERIA**

Living in **Ireland** since: **1999**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Tinu was born into a political family in Nigeria. Her father was a politician in Nigeria. In the 1990's in Nigeria there was a lot violence between political parties, kidnappings and murder were not uncommon. This was a time when Nigeria was transitioning from military rule to democracy. The international community were not helpful during this time of transition as the status quo with military rule favoured corrupt oil deals with foreign entities. Tinu was newly married in 1999 and her father who was educated in the UK in the 1950's had good Irish connections and had visited Ireland during this time. Tinu also had sisters already living and settled in the UK. Tinu's decision to migrate to Ireland was heavily influenced by the Irish nuns who educated her and who were also returning to Ireland at this time in the late 1990's. Tinu's is a qualified architect. When Tinu arrived in Ireland she was based in Kenmare direct provision center while her application was being processed in the 2000. In contrast with what happens today, people in direct provision having to wait for years sometimes up to 7 or 8 for work permits, Tinu was able to find employment almost immediately. The very strong local community embraced

the new arrivals and insisted that they be allowed to work regardless of national policy. The community elders in Kenmare immediately recognised the skills people such as Tinu possessed and insisted they be allowed work and integrate themselves into their new community in an organic natural, normal way. Tinu has drawn on this first positive experience of Ireland over the past 17 years as a very prominent activist helping other Asylum Seekers in many locations and situations across Ireland, influencing policy at government level. Tinu is currently employed as Programme Director of Cultur. Tinu joined Cultur in 2016 as a Project Manager and has over 14 years' experience working with NGO, public sector, government funded projects including providing training support and facilitating cross cultural community dialogue within delicate and challenging contexts. Tinu has a degree in Community Studies from Dundalk Institute of Technology and MPhil in Conflict Resolution & Reconciliation from Trinity College Ireland.

**“... IN KENMARE WE WERE SO MUCH LIKE THEIR BABIES.”**

## TINU'S STORY CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

Tinu's father was a politician in Nigeria in the 1990's and Tinu and her family were pro-democracy and against military rule. In the late 1990's Tinu's father decided to leave Nigeria for personal safety reasons. Kidnapping and violence linked to politics was commonplace during this time of transition in a society with a long history of military coups and natural opposition to the democratic process with many complexities which are beyond the scope of this article to explain. To help the reader gain some insight into Nigerian political culture

# THE STORIES: TINU

we cite an article by 'Human Rights Watch' *"The use of violence as a political tool has been common in Nigeria both before and since President Obasanjo first came to power in 1999. The 1999 elections were also marred by violence and intimidation, as well as widespread fraud and rigging. Previous Nigerian governments had used political violence even more brutally and systematically, often without any real pretence of operating within a democratic system. Despite the shift from military to civilian rule, political has remained prevalent. It has been facilitated by the wide availability of small arms and a large population of unemployed young men who are willing to be hired and armed by politicians to intimidate their opponents"*.

## STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY 'AT DIFFERENT TIMES & LOCATIONS'

Tinu's story about her first interactions with Irish people in Kenmare, in County Kerry compared to other locations in Ireland are worth highlighting here. In Kenmare, the local community embraced Tinu and her colleagues. The natives of Kenmare were adamant that the new members of the community from the direct provision centre could be fully integrated into the local community generally and the workforce immediately. They actively encouraged Tinu for example to go and seek an interview for a job in a local architect's office as there was a shortage of skilled architects at this time (early 2000's) due to the massive boom in the construction industry in Ireland. This experience mentioned earlier is a revelation to me when compared with the depressing story about how people are suffering in direct provision centres today, with totally unacceptable long delays and barriers to fundamental human rights such as the right to work and education.

Tinu spoke about how supportive her work colleagues were in Kenmare

and how well she was received into the architectural community. Indeed they were fascinated by this exotict lady from Nigeria asking *"could I feel your skin... a lot of people there have not seen a black person before"* Neighbours would offer Tinu lifts to go shopping and were very helpful... *"we were like their babies"*. It is worth noting at this point that even though Tinu did not have her official work papers the local community over-ruled the government official and allowed her work in her chosen profession.

Tinu moved from Kenmare to another town in the north east of Ireland (a border county) in late 2000. Her initial experience here contrasted greatly with Kenmare, racism was rife in their new location. They were confronted face to face and told *"go back to your country"*. *"Children were bullied in schools and walls used for racist remarks... it was hell then"*. It was at this time that Tinu and some other women started the 'Louth African Women Support Group' to have one voice. Tinu felt that the racism was due to a lack of basic information about them... the Irish government had not provided any information about them to the local people... *"The locals were only listening to the local media's bad publicity about them etc. "you are taking our jobs"... you get new buggy's etc."* Tinu also attributes the border county hostility towards them to their own history of conflict in nearby northern Ireland.

In an effort to counter this racism Tinu and her colleagues began to visit local primary schools to teach young children about her (Nigerian) culture. Tinu drew strength from her previous positive Kenmare experience and believed that the community would understand them better with a bottom up approach by interacting with them face to face. This approach had a positive impact on the wider community, the racist attitudes seemed to abate. Tinu's

I started a group for women to give ourselves a voice.

# THE STORIES: TINU

school initiative started a conversation as children from the school would go home and tell their parents about Tinu's culture. Tinu began work with the HSE as a community mother visiting new mothers from the migrant community. In the following years Tinu also advised the HSE on a wide variety of issues affecting migrant families.

## BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

While working with the HSE Tinu continued her voluntary work with the Louth African Women's Support Group. The situation for women in direct provision can be tough because their husbands are the traditional bread winners in their home countries but are not allowed to work here in Ireland. This situation brings added pressure on women who are married or in established relationships with families. Tinu obtained support from Dundalk IT who welcomed Tinu to visit classrooms and talk about their situation in Ireland. Tinu also worked on the cross border center for community studies where she met her mentor Ann McGeenery. Tinu worked there as an ethnic minority officer, this initial voluntary work led to paid employment and opened up some funding opportunities. Her core work was to consult with all relevant organisation in the county to help Asylum Seekers and Migrants obtain qualifications to add to their existing qualifications to help them transition into the workplace when they were legalised. Tinu is a true role model in any context and an inspiration for us all.

**I visited classrooms and talked about the situation of refugees in Ireland.**

# THE STORIES: MARIJANA



First name: **MARIJANA**

Last name: **ČEŠNOVAR**

Age: **63**

Country of origin: **BOSNIA**

Living in **Slovenia** since: **1992**

## SHORT SUMMARY

Marijana Češnovars' husband died in 1990 and in 1992 Sarajevo and Bosnia got involved in the Bosnian war. Marijana spent some fifty more days in Sarajevo. This was an appalling experience. Next, she left with her son and arrived in Slovenia. Though she holds a university degree in economics and her grandmother lived in Slovenia where the family owns a bed-and-sitter, though she spoke some Slovene when she arrived, she did not feel accepted for a very long time. Slovenian people are sensitive as concerns the accent of those whose mother language is Serbo-Croatians and speaking Slovene has always been a challenge for Marijana. Having enrolled at Slovenian Third Age University, she finally feels accepted and integrated. In later life, what counts is the ability to be yourself and to nurture relationships. You can get integrated through studying and admiring beauty together with the natives.

## “WHO YOU ARE, NOT WHAT YOU ARE, IS IMPORTANT”

### CONFLICT

The war in Sarajevo started on the 6th April, 1992. This was unbelievable. The one month and a half she spent in Sarajevo at war before she left has been the most horrifying and uncertain time in her life. Her husband had died in November 1990 due to a massive heart attack, her ex-company's building was one of the first buildings to be destroyed during the war, so she found herself alone, jobless and a single mother of a 7-year old boy.

### ESCAPE

*“A friend of mine directed me to the organisation »Children's Embassy«. I did not hesitate and my decision to leave was firm. I was lucky to have my grandmother living in Slovenia in a bed sitter of which we, as a family, were owners.*

*I travelled with my son by bus together with many other women of all ages and their new born children.*

*There was a lot of crying and screaming of women who did not know if their family members were alive, wounded or dead. There was also shooting and we were very scared. Two days later taking hidden roads through Bosnian hills we reached Split and continued our way to Rijeka and from there on to Ljubljana.*

*In those days I still firmly believed the war in Sarajevo would not last and we could go back shortly. I was so naïve!”*

**She could ean on people close to her, some professionals and institutions.**



# THE STORIES: MARIJANA

## BELONGING

*“The first months brought us certainty that the war back in Bosnia was getting worse, that going back would not be possible. In those days we also found out who our real friends were and which family ties were valuable. Some friends and relatives did not even call on me, being afraid that I would need their help. In August 1992, I decided my son should go to a Slovenian primary school. Our refugee status did not make the decision any easier. We had to knock on many office and school doors. I even went to the Ministry of Education. Finally my son got enrolled into the elementary school Tone Tomšič. The headmaster, a wonderfully nice man- helped me. But, nevertheless, my son’s experience there was somehow mixed. Some experience were desolating like when he was asked to write about France Prešern the Slovenian iconic poet and his text was scored best in his class, but my son was not allowed to read it to the others because this »was would not be appropriate for a refugee«. Such stories made me sad and I could not explain the reason why to my little boy.*

*Another experience. My son proudly took his Ljubljana born grand mother, who had just arrived from Sarajevo to school as to show everybody how good her Slovene was. It is not hard to imagine why he did it; to demonstrate that we were Slovene as well and to oppose his school mates’ ill mannered and hurting remarks. Children will be cruel.*

*Back in Sarajevo, I had some Slovenian business partners, but due to the war, changes and privatisation processes many contacts and ties disappeared. This was difficult for me when I started searching for a job. A neighbour of mine directed me to the Centre of social work - I will never forget how kind the social worker there was.*

**She finally feels integrated since she has enrolled at Slovenian Third Age University.**

*He did everything, all he could, to help me.*

*In September 1992 I started cleaning apartments of three Slovenian families of intellectuals. Personally, I graduated from university and I hold a university degree of economics. But they considered me mostly as a cleaning lady not as a person with diverse competencies. I noticed that the most important was how I spoke Slovene, my accent. I do not know why, but speaking foreign languages has always been a problem for me. Many people criticized me. How come that your mother didn't teach you Slovene? I was frequently asked. But she did teach me enough to communicate with Slovenian people during my annual holidays when I regularly came to Slovenia. And later, speaking Slovenian language helped me working with our Slovenian business partners.*

*Two years later I found a job in a charcuterie store. Language, language again! Slovenian society is closed and does not open up easily towards refugees from former Yugoslavia.*

*I also met my future husband in those days. He is Slovene but has never had any prejudices concerning my origin and me being a refugee.*

*Later, a colleague suggested I should enrol at Slovenian Third Age University where I started studying art history. It structures my life, and it has opened up my life to the outside world.*

*Going back to Sarajevo? No, I would not go back to Sarajevo because it has changed and has become a town for tourists, no more. The longer you live there, the less you like it. My son has grown up in Slovenia, has finished his schooling here, got a job, got integrated, totally. I am happily married and despite numerous challenges I have had to cope with, I think I was immensely lucky. This might sound cruel, coming from a refugee like myself, but in my opinion not all refugees should be allowed to cross the border and settle in a country, unless they are ready to make an effort to integrate in the host society.”*



# SUMMARY:

**26** stories of former refugees depicted here have in our opinion formed a very strong and convincing argument when discussing whether a society should make efforts to include refugees (and generally: migrants) socially and give them every help possible to enable them integrate into their new societies. We have seen that the contributions of former refugees towards society can be rich and varied and economically beneficial for all stakeholders concerned.

In summary, we had 26 interviewees, 8 women and 18 men, aged from 19 to 54. Their countries of origin are: Afghanistan, Albania, Bosnia, DR Kongo, Gambia, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan (Turkey), Nigeria, Serbia, Syria, and Zimbabwe.

They have left their country either a long time ago (up to 35 years) or came to their new country fairly recently, e.g. 2 years ago. People were forced to leave their countries at all stages of their lives and development. In our examples we show the age ranges from a 2 year old toddler Nilab, to a 35 year old adult Yassir and in between you have the example of Artan, an adolescent who had to travel alone without parental support.

Yassir was a professor at the university when he had to flee his country. Others were visiting university, still went to school, where employed or had their own business.

Social inclusion may not mean the same in each of the partners' countries, depending on legal regulations, the economic situation the diversity of the society in general and workplace regulations.

But even those examples of former refugees who are on their way to Social Inclusion may function as a very good role model for those who just came to their new environment and are eager to take the first steps towards Social Inclusion.

# THE CONTEXT OF THE ESCAPE STORIES:

## AFGHANISTAN:

### WAR IN AFGHANISTAN (2001 - PRESENT)

Afghanistan War, international conflict in Afghanistan began in 2001, triggered by September 11 attacks, and consisted of three phases.

The first phase — toppling the Taliban (the ultraconservative political and religious faction that ruled Afghanistan and provided sanctuary for al-Qaeda, perpetrators of the September 11 attacks) — was brief, lasting just two months.

The second phase, from 2002 until 2008, was marked by a U.S. strategy of defeating the Taliban militarily and rebuilding core institutions of the Afghan state.

The third phase, a turn to classic counterinsurgency doctrine, began in 2008 and accelerated with U.S. Pres. Barack Obama's 2009 decision to temporarily increase the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. The larger force was used to implement a strategy of protecting the population from Taliban attacks and supporting efforts to reintegrate insurgents into Afghan society. The strategy came coupled with a timetable for the withdrawal of the foreign forces from Afghanistan; beginning in 2011, security responsibilities would be gradually handed over to the Afghan military and police. The new approach largely failed to achieve its aims. Insurgent attacks and civilian casualties remained stubbornly high, while many of the Afghan military and police units taking over security duties appeared to be ill-prepared to hold off the Taliban. By the time the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) combat mission formally ended in December 2014, the 13-year Afghanistan War had become the longest war ever fought by the United States. Up to today, the attacks on US-military bases and on civilian aims have not stopped.

## ALBANIA:

'The Albanian civil war, also known as the Albanian rebellion, Albanian unrest or the Pyramid crisis, was a period of anarchy, civil disorder and violence in Albania in 1997, sparked by Ponzi scheme failures. The government was toppled and more than 2,000 people were killed. The government quelled revolts in the north, the ability of the government and military to maintain order began to collapse, especially in the southern half of Albania, which fell under the control of rebels and criminal gangs.'

'The Opening of the depots was the opening of weapons depots in the north, for protection against the violence of the south. When southern Albanian bases were looted, it was estimated that, on average, every male from the age of ten upwards possessed at least one firearm and ample ammunition. In order to protect the civilians in north and central Albania, the government allowed civilians to arm themselves from government arms depots. During the rebellion 656,000 weapons of various types, along with 1.5 billion rounds of ammunition, 3.5 million hand grenades and one million land mines, were looted from army depots.'

'Taking advantage of the difficult situations, criminal groups armed themselves and took control of entire cities. Most had been imprisoned in Greece, but suddenly escaped and returned to Albania. Gangs brought attacks with explosives and shooting, leaving dozens dead.'

# THE CONTEXT OF THE ESCAPE STORIES:

## BOSNIA:

Bosnian conflict, ethnically rooted war (1992–95) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a former republic of Yugoslavia with a multi ethnic population comprising Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Serbs, and Croats. After years of bitter fighting that involved the three Bosnian groups as well as the Yugoslav army, Western countries with backing by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) imposed a final cease-fire negotiated at Dayton, Ohio, U.S., in 1995. In 1991 several self-styled “Serb Autonomous Regions” were declared in areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina with large Serb populations. When the European Community (EC; later succeeded by the European Union) recognized the independence of Croatia and Slovenia in December, it invited Bosnia and Herzegovina to apply for recognition also. A referendum on independence was held during February 29–March 1, 1992, although Karadžić’s party obstructed voting in most Serb-populated areas and almost no Bosnian Serbs voted. Of the nearly two-thirds of the electorate that did cast a vote, almost all voted for independence, which President Izetbegović officially proclaimed on March 3, 1992.

## DR KONGO:

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), formerly Zaire, a country located in Central Africa, has a long history of conflict, but its recent crises can be traced to the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The Congolese Civil Wars, which began in 1996, brought about the end of Mobutu Sese Seko’s 32-year reign and devastated the country. With UN electoral assistance provided under the auspices of MONUC, Joseph Kabila, became the first democratically-elected president of the DRC in 2006. But this democratic transition has not brought about the change that was hoped for in the perpetually conflict-ridden DRC, where it is estimated that more than 6 million people have been killed from war-induced causes. These wars ultimately involved nine African nations, multiple groups of UN peacekeepers and twenty armed groups. In addition, egregious human rights abuses such as systematic rape and wanton murder, among other violations, have created a horrific humanitarian crisis in the DRC and surrounding region.

Much of this conflict has arisen from violence between the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) and several rebel factions, including the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), Mai-Mai Sheka, and M23. This persistent violence, coupled with the struggle for control of the DRC’s natural resources, continues to further destabilize an already-fragmented nation.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is extremely rich in natural resources, but has a lack of infrastructure, deep rooted corruption, and centuries of both commercial and colonial extraction and exploitation with little holistic development. Besides the capital, Kinshasa, the other major cities, Lubumbashi and Mbuji-Mayi, are both mining communities. DR Congo’s largest export is raw minerals, with China accepting over 50% of DRC’s exports in 2012. As of 2015, according to the Human Development Index (HDI), DR Congo has a low level of human development, ranking 176 out of 187 countries.

# THE CONTEXT OF THE ESCAPE STORIES:

## GAMBIA:

'The Gambia's current economic situation and crisis is also having a huge impact of the decision of young Gambians to leave the country in hope of finding work and a better life in Europe.'

'The government of President Yahya Jammeh, in power since a 1994 coup, frequently committed serious human rights violations including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture against those who voiced opposition to the government of President Yahya Jammeh.'

'State security forces most frequently implicated in violations were members of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), a paramilitary group known as the "Junglers," and the Gambian Police Force. Those targeted included journalists, political opponents, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, many of whom fled Gambia out of fear.'

## IRAN:

### THE IRAN-IRAQ CONFLICT

The Iran–Iraq War was an armed conflict between Iran and Iraq lasting from September, 22<sup>nd</sup> 1980, when Iraq invaded Iran, to August 1988. The war followed a long history of border disputes, and was motivated by fears that the Iranian Revolution in 1979 would inspire insurgency among Iraq's long-suppressed Shi'ite majority, as well as Iraq's desire to replace Iran as the dominant Persian Gulf state. Although Iraq hoped to take advantage of Iran's revolutionary chaos and attacked without formal warning, it made only limited progress into Iran and was quickly repelled; Iran regained virtually all lost territory by June 1982. For the next six years, Iran was on the offensive

The conflict has been compared to World War I in terms of the tactics used, including large-scale trench warfare with barbed wire stretched across trenches, manned machine gun posts, bayonet charges, "human wave attacks", and extensive use of chemical weapons by Iraq, and later deliberate attacks on civilian targets. The United States and the Soviet Union, together with many Western and Arab countries, provided support for Iraq, while Iran was largely isolated. After eight years of war, war-weariness, lack of international sympathy as Iraq was targeting Iranian civilians with weapons of mass destruction, and increasing tension between Iran and United States eventually led to an UN-brokered ceasefire.

Half a million Iraqi and Iranian soldiers, with an equivalent number of civilians, are believed to have died, with many more injured; however, the war brought neither reparations nor changes in borders. A number of proxy forces participated in the war, most notably the Iranian People's Mujahedin of Iran siding with Ba'athist Iraq and Iraqi Kurdish militias of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan siding with Iran — all suffering a major blow by the end of the conflict.

# THE CONTEXT OF THE ESCAPE STORIES:

## IRAQ:

### THE WAR IN IRAQ

The American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 toppled the brutal authoritarian government of Saddam Hussein and unleashed a massive sectarian civil war when the coalition forces exited Iraq.

At the heart of the struggle is the ascent by the majority Shiite Arabs to ruling status. Fervently opposed to the Shiite-led government are armed factions of Sunni Arabs who chafe at the overturning of the old order. British colonialists installed Sunni Arabs as proxy rulers in the early 20th century, and Sunni families and tribes managed to hold onto power after Iraq was granted independence and even as the country's Shiite population steadily increased. Saddam Hussein was a Sunni strongman from the north who crushed anyone opposed to him, but reserved some of his most vicious punishments for the Shiite Arabs and Kurds, two groups in Iraq that have long sought a significant measure of power or independence.

The recent situation or status of violence and unrest in Iraq focuses on the city of Mosul where American led bombing in late 2016 liberated the city from ISIS terror fighters.

## KURDISTAN:

'Over the past hundred years, the desire for an independent Kurdish state has created conflicts mainly with the Turkish and Iraqi populations in the areas where most of the Kurds live. This conflict has important geographical implications as well. With the formation of Turkey in 1923, Kemal Ataturk, the new Turkish President, threw out the treaty and denied the Kurds their own state. This was the beginning of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. In 1924, Turkey even passed a law banning the use of the Kurdish language in public places.'

'Another group of people to consider is the Kurds living in Iraq. Major conflict between the Kurds and Iraqis did not really begin until 1961, when a war broke out that lasted until 1970. Around this time, Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq. In 1975, Hussein adopted a policy of eradicating the Kurds from his country. Over the next fifteen years, the Iraqi army bombed Kurdish villages, and poisoned the Kurds with cyanide and mustard gas.'

'The reasons for these conflicts have great relevance to geography. The areas of geography relating to these specific conflicts are a historical claim to territory on the part of the Kurds, cultural geography, economic geography, and political geography. They have lived in the area for over 2000 years. For this reason, they desire the establishment of a Kurdish homeland. Second, and probably most important, is that this conflict involves cultural geography. The Kurds are ethnically and culturally different from both the Turks and the Iraqis. They speak a different language, and while all three groups are Muslim, they all practice different forms. The Kurds have used this cultural difference as a reason to establish a homeland.'

'In Turkey, a civil war between the Kurds and Turks has been going on for the last ten years; approximately 15,000 people have been killed so far.'

# THE CONTEXT OF THE ESCAPE STORIES:

## NIGERIA:

Boko Haram has left death and disaster in its wake since 2009. The Islamic extremist group was formed in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri Borno state. The core political principle of the group was establishing an Islamic state and denouncing western education. With over 6,644 deaths to its credit in 2014, Boko Haram became the deadliest terrorist group in the world according to the Global Terrorist Index 2015 report by the Institute of Economics and Peace. The group has been responsible for the deaths of over 20,000 people and displaced over 2.3 million leading to a humanitarian crisis in the country.

'Nigeria is already a poverty-stricken country. With about 90% of its population living on less than \$2 a day and ironically having the largest economy in Africa.'

'UNICEF estimates that as many as 75,000 children would die in 2017 from severe acute malnutrition, respiratory diseases, measles, etc. The severity of the humanitarian crises might be the worst in the world.'

## SERBIA:

### THE BALKANS WAR 1991 - 2000

The former Yugoslavia was a Socialist state created after German occupation in World War II and a bitter civil war. A federation of six republics, it brought together Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Albanians, Slovenes and others under a comparatively relaxed communist regime. Tensions between these groups were successfully suppressed under the leadership of President Tito.

After Tito's death in 1980, tensions re-emerged. Calls for more autonomy within Yugoslavia by nationalist groups led in 1991 to declarations of independence in Croatia and Slovenia.

Bosnia, with a complex mix of Serbs, Muslims and Croats, was next to try for independence. Yugoslav army units, withdrawn from Croatia and renamed the Bosnian Serb Army, carved out a huge swathe of Serb-dominated territory. Over a million Bosnian Muslims and Croats were driven from their homes in ethnic cleansing. Serbs suffered too. The capital Sarajevo was besieged and shelled. In August 1995, the Croatian army stormed areas in Croatia under Serb control prompting thousands to flee.



# THE CONTEXT OF THE ESCAPE STORIES:

## SYRIA:

The Syrian Civil War is an ongoing armed conflict in Syria between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and his allies on one side and various forces opposing him. The unrest in Syria, part of a wider wave of 2011 Arab Spring protests, grew out of discontent with the Assad government and escalated to an armed conflict after protests calling for his removal were violently suppressed. The war is being fought by several factions: the Syrian government and its allies, a loose alliance of Sunni Arab rebel groups (including the Free Syrian Army), the majority-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Salafi jihadist groups (including al-Nusra Front) who cooperate with the Sunni rebel groups, and the ISIS.

Syrian opposition groups formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and seized control of the area surrounding Aleppo and parts of southern Syria. Over time, some factions of the Syrian opposition split from their original moderate position to pursue an Islamist vision for Syria, joining groups such as al-Nusra Front and ISI. In 2015, the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) joined forces with Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, and some Turkmen groups, to form the Syrian Democratic Forces, while most Turkmen groups remained with the FSA and Hezbollah militarily engaged in support of the Syrian government, while beginning in 2014, a coalition of NATO countries began launching airstrikes against ISIS. As of 2017, the war is still ongoing, with USA and Russia interfering on opposite sides.

## ZIMBABWE:

### VIOLENCE AND UNREST IN ZIMBABWE

Reuben points out, many people outside Zimbabwe think that Mugabe still has power. The reality is that as a 93-year-old man he is just a figurehead for the people in power who are backed by the national Army.

Violence and unrest have continued to plague Zimbabwe over the last four decades, with Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF party challenged by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai. Robert Mugabe won another term of office in controversial elections held in 2013.

### CREATION OF A PARTY

Robert Mugabe became head of the ZANU party in 1970. This party later re-merged with Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU to form the ZANU-PF or "Patriotic Front".

Black Zimbabweans had been fighting for their rights for many decades. Opposition parties formed, such as the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) under Joshua Nkomo. In 1963, this party split and the more radical wing formed the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). Guerrilla warfare broke out, turning into civil war in the 1970s.

# CONCLUSIONS:

## WHAT CAN BE LEARNED BY THE STORIES OF THIS BROCHURE?

Reading the stories, one can detect strategies that these outstanding people adopted in order to first survive and then integrate into the new society. These strategies cannot be taken as universal, but they certainly helped these individuals in getting included in their new environments. They might inspire others to go forward in their effort to being an equal part of their host society. We would like to outline these strategies in order to be discussed and “taught”.

### Willingness to learn (the language) and achieve goals

Many interviewees made it very clear that their first and foremost concern was to learn the new language. *“Yassir, this is your job now, to learn the language”*, is what Yassir said. Vesnas words are: *“Learning the language of the host country is a must”*.

Artan sat in front of the television for hours and repeated every word spoken in order to learn Italian. It takes a great ambition and endurance to learn a new language sufficiently, but without mastery of the language inclusion cannot really be obtained.

Abdul said: *“Language is one’s own identity”*. So, reaching for a new identity is closely related to learning the language of the new country.

### Resilience and perseverance

Learning the language and learning to adapt in a new environment, with all the obstacles to be overcome and the lack of

information, and very often in a situation of uncertainty regarding the legal outcome of the asylum process, takes a lot of strength. Where does this strength come from? Many of the interviewees talked about an education that taught them early on that they have to make an effort to succeed, that they have to stay learning and love learning.

*“It is not difficult to rebuild a house, it is not difficult to build a new road, the real issue is how to rebuild life”*, is what Vahida said.

Nasruddin said: *“Difficulties make us stronger”*. This is even taking it one step further: the strength that is needed to overcome obstacles is growing by fighting these very obstacles. Can resilience be learned? New research says it can and it can even be taught.

And Sadat from Germany said: *“If you have goals, you have to fight for them. If you are not willing to do that, forget about your goals”*.

### Staying active and setting yourself aims

Sitting in a welcome facility for refugees for years, not able or not allowed to work, can be very troubling and the lack of social contacts is a danger for mental health, as Artans story shows. But getting active and involved opens new opportunities. People with a target and an agenda gather strength from their activities, as the stories of Reuben, Conteh, Gholam and others show. By involving themselves in an effort to improve their own situation (e.g. Reubens fight against Direct Provision in Ireland) they helped themselves, came into contact with likeminded fellow refugees and with the host community. But even without a goal like this, staying active and getting involved with a group is a very good trigger for Social Inclusion: *“Acting as a group has helped us to get through difficulties”*, Conteh said.

# CONCLUSIONS:

## Getting in contact with members of the host country, letting yourself be helped and giving back to them

Almost all interviewees reported that they got help from members of their new surrounding. Whether they identified certain people, like the neighbor of Elvira, who fought for the prolongation of their stay in Germany, or they talked about the support of members of social organizations like GRC in Athens, they needed help and they got it. And they were able to look for it and take it! It is not easy to be in a position of needing help for a long time, people may feel ashamed or ridiculed. Reuben said: *“In my country, the man of the family is the bread winner and I felt so bad towards my children because I could not provide for them”*. And: they want to give something back. And many did! They are still in contact with their helpers, they are now part of a group in a helping profession (as interpreters, social workers, educators, film makers), they do voluntary work by helping others in the same situation as they have been in or they try very hard to have a successful professional career in order to earn the appreciation of the new society.

## Claiming the right to be a part of the (new) society

*“They did not know that the world is not coming with borders!”* This quote from Shaha's interview is the basis of a self-assurance some interviewees showed: we are humans and we have a right to live where we are safe and can enjoy a happy life.

Nilab said *“I am a citizen of the world”*.

Going back to the “characteristics” of a Role Model according to Marilyn Price-Mitchell, these are the most important features of a Role Model:

- Passion and Ability to Inspire
- Clear Set of Values
- Commitment to Community
- Selflessness and Acceptance of Others
- Ability to Overcome Obstacles

Looking closely to the five most important strategies of our interviewees, we see resemblance between their “methods and means”, the dimensions of Social Inclusion and the characteristics above:

Dimension of Social Inclusion according to Prof. F. Heckmann	Characteristics of a Role Model (according to M. Price-Mitchell)	Strategies of Interviewees (as shown in the interviews)
STRUCTURAL DIMENSION	Passion and Ability to Inspire	Willingness to learn (the language) and achieve goals
POLITICAL DIMENSION	Clear Set of Values	Claiming the right to be a part of the (new) society
SOCIAL/CULTURAL DIMENSION	Commitment to Community	Getting in contact with members of the host country, letting yourself be helped and giving back to them
SOCIAL DIMENSION	Selflessness and Acceptance of Others	Staying active and setting yourself aims
PERSONAL DIMENSION	Ability to Overcome Obstacles	Resilience and perseverance

# CONCLUSIONS:

We as a partnership are convinced that the interviews and the stories of former refugees can give a new insight into the connection between Social Inclusion and Role Model Learning, elaborated in this case study via the stories told by 26 people with courage, enthusiasm and a very reflective view on themselves.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH THIS BROCHURE?

This brochure will be one of the components of the RefugeesIN package (<https://www.refugeesinproject.eu/en/pack.html>) and can be used in educational settings to teach to refugees and to the members of the society in general. Just a few ideas how to use this brochure are pointed out here, much more will be explained in the pack.

### This brochure can be used in many ways:

- In language courses with refugees/migrants it can be read, discussed, and used to encourage the learners to tell their own stories.
- This goes of course for courses regarding "Orientation in the new society".
- In political education, they can be used as examples of stories that have to be considered when talking about prejudices, stereotypes etc., for younger learners and adults as well.
- In schools these stories and their context material can be part of the learning in political sciences, geography or history.
- In political debates, these interviews can be used to make

our claim to a better inclusion policy in our own countries even stronger.

- In creative writing classes, these stories can encourage others to write their stories: refugees or not, each one of us has to tell a stories of our life, with obstacles, success, change and challenge. Let's hear them!
- In film or photo activities, these stories can be used as a basis for visual story telling, or by example, take a story of a member and make it into a short documentary. This will be the task of the course that will be held during 2017 in the framework of this project.

## HOW TO CONTACT US

If you would like to contact us, add a story or comment on one, feel free to visit our website: [www.refugeesinproject.eu](http://www.refugeesinproject.eu)

The blog of the project <https://www.refugeesinproject.eu/en/blog.html> will give you opportunities to participate and get in touch with the partners of this project.

If you like, spread this brochure in your community, we like the like-button on our facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/ProjectRefugeesIN/>

# THANK YOU & REFERENCES

## THANK YOU & REFERENCES

This brochure could not have come to life without so many former refugees willing to tell their real-life stories, openly and honestly. Their courage is to be admired. But we would like to thank not only them but all the people/organizations that brought us in contact with this amazing people and those who kindly did its final review as well.

We would like to thank contributors to this brochure:

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# THANK YOU & REFERENCES

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# THANK YOU & REFERENCES

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